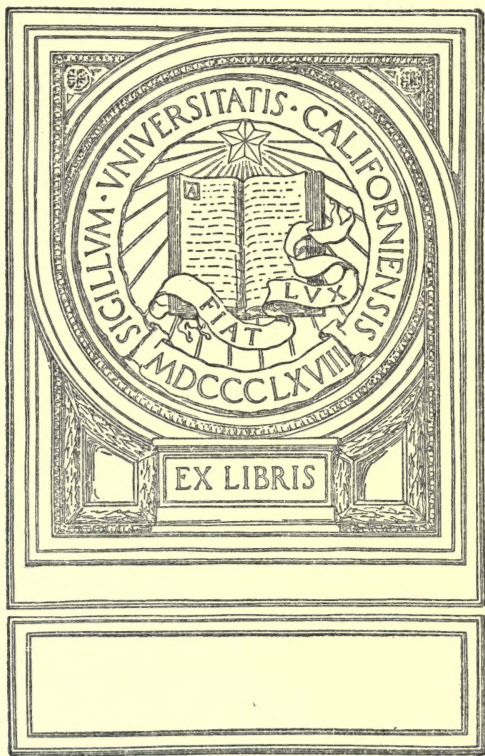


THE
YOUNGEST
WORLD

ROBERT DUNN



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THE YOUNGEST WORLD

“ ‘What should I have to look forward to?’ ”

“ ‘Life! . . . Are you a prophet that you can say what it may have in store for you? Seek, and you will find. God may perhaps have been awaiting you there.’ ”

Dostoyevsky.

THE YOUNGEST WORLD

A Novel of the Frontier

BY
ROBERT DUNN

Author of

"The Shameless Diary of an Explorer," etc.



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1914

THE
GROWING WORLD
A STORY OF THE FUTURE
BY
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THE YOUNGEST WORLD

BOOK ONE

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CHAPTER I

MARTHA

I

THE woman stood at the sink, plunging the dishes into the soapy water with an air of resignation. The man sat at the kitchen table. He ate moodily, slanting his black eyelashes toward his plate.

It was a Sunday morning, and therefore no pickers would be working in the strawberry fields which surrounded the lonely house. In the nomadic life that they led, Gabriel Thain and his wife spent most of their Sabbaths thus: Arlene wrote to her mother down in Sacramento, mended Gail's working clothes, and then brought him a pillow from their bed when he threw himself on the sofa to read the Seattle newspapers.

The pickers came to the fields by rail on weekdays during this fortnight in May when the berries were ripe. Thain was their foreman, the ruler of the furrows in the big clearing amid the ragged Pacific forests. The job was as temporary as all his work had been since he had married Arlene — ran away with her from the State university in Seattle that both had attended. He had served as a time-keeper for the Japanese labourers at the Sequalmie hydro-electric plant,

for the crew excavating the new Cascade tunnel, as overseer for an oyster company up the Sound.

Soon, down at the edge of the forest, the morning train whistled.

"Late again," said Gail, pushing away the dishes before him. "And another hour before that station-master's kid gets up here with my paper."

"You expect another letter like that one came last night?" asked Arlene, without turning from her suds. "You hardly said a word since you got it, and didn't sleep a wink." She spoke querulously, yet appeasingly, and in a woman's hinting way.

"No," he answered. "It said enough. But even it won't make any difference."

Arlene half turned toward him, then checked herself.

"Shall I fix the sofa for you to lay on?" she asked, in a tone of self-effacement. "And if you get time, you better show me how you want your shirt-bands let out."

Gail did not answer her.

"I'm not asking you to show me the letter," she went on with a timid deliberation. "But, Gail, it was from a woman, wasn't it? One of your women? And the first you've got from any of them in all the years that we've been married?"

He rose from the table and began pacing up and down the kitchen.

"Yes," he answered suddenly. His resolve to speak surprised him. "And so you won't be tempted to ask me, I'll tell you which one wrote it. It was from Martha Harlow. The last I saw of her, she was working in a restaurant on Pike Street — Minker's. And she was the only one of them, besides you, who ever

counted." His voice thickened. "But I've not read all she had to say yet. I couldn't."

"Oh. . . ."

The word carried neither surprise, satisfaction, nor chagrin. It seemed charged with pity, perhaps some pity for herself. She wiped her hands on the roller towel and stepped to the table, avoiding her husband's set eyes. She took his empty cup and plate, and, turning back to the sink, dropped them into the steaming water with a sigh.

The creaking of Gail's shoes began to measure the silence.

When he had run away with Arlene, he had promised to keep himself true to her, provided that she would never ask him about the past. And up to this moment husband and wife had both kept that compact. But now the vacant look in the eyes of each showed that fidelity was no longer paramount to either.

Gail stopped walking abruptly, and said:

"Her writing was ten days old. It went to our last address. Martha was quite sick. I ought to have gone to her. But likely they're well now, and it's no use."

The woman started, but this time it was she who did not reply.

"Can't you be jealous?" he asked, taking a swift step toward her. "Haven't you any of a wife's feelings?"

Arlene faced him with a shudder. "Don't, don't reproach me," she pleaded, but languidly. "Haven't I tried my best? And I've loved you as much as it's been in my nature to."

"Forgive me," Gail muttered, making an impatient gesture,

He sat down on the horse-hair sofa. They lapsed into the silence which for the past two years had ended their many desultory talks upon the subject of the fruitless and unhappy life they led.

II

Thain was an indifferent student at the college in Seattle, but he had been its star athlete.

Chemistry most appealed to his mind, which was blunt and slow, yet searching; but in that science hardly more than its axioms held him. These often moved him to speculate vaguely upon chemical discoveries, and their power to strengthen and perpetuate the life in which he moved. But just as he could never grasp the intricacies by which the elements combined, so he could not have expressed any of his visions of the vast promises which chemistry made to him. Then, stirred by impulses of service toward one's fellow-men, he determined to become a doctor. This represented Gail in his best light, when at the age of twenty he encountered Arlene in the class-room. For marrying her, his dead father's friends withdrew the money with which they had been paying for his education. He was cast out into the darkness of half-knowledge respecting himself and his world, among the floating manual labourers of the Northwest — a somewhat strong being in whom a curiosity concerning existence was just at the verge of dawning.

Though an athlete he was not by nature an ascetic. But puritanism not having crossed the Cascade Mountains, Gail's bent for the streets at night of the restless city did not mar him in his classmates' eyes. However, his stronger passions and greater physical maturity divided his life from theirs. Only on the foot-ball field

was he one of them. He knew that he excelled all his fellows in vitality, and his assurance of that superiority made him approve the life he led. Whatever the vigour of his body decreed seemed right and sane to Gail, but beyond that assumption he did not reason about the trend of any of his instincts.

Arlene also became an outsider within the college. Her father was a real estate speculator, and had ended a meteoric career in dishonour and suicide. The unmoral pity of the West rallied Lena's classmates to her in an excess of sympathy. But whether in bitterness or resignation, or from a curious fatalism in her soul, she shunned their advances, and chose to eat out her heart alone. Her mother, stung by disgrace, and forced to work in support of the girl's education, went back to the school that she had taught in California before coming to Puget Sound. Thus Lena became a fallow soil for love, and the last of Gabriel Thain's infatuations.

At that time she was full of feminine ambitions. She did church rescue work south of the Yesler Way. She clung more strongly than Gail to the notion of helping the unfortunates of the raw city. And during their courtship he had to beware of meeting her on his nocturnal prowls. Her associates in the mission considered her character fine, called her high-minded. Yet she was curiously pliant — a birthright of the older community to the south where she had been raised, and right and wrong, the shams and avidities of life stood out in a less sharp relief than in the younger northern city. Up to the day on which the Army chaplain from Fort Lawton had united them, Gail had wondered why she never included him among those whom she sought to uplift. It seemed unwomanlike.

The abeyance of Gail's passion after their first year together left a void between them. And he seemed to succeed at nothing. He had little ardour for steady work; he lost position after position. In the beginning, the fact that they got no child was not a disappointment to him; but with the passing years, as they went from farm to workshop, from workshop to farm, he began to associate this failure in fatherhood with his discontent. He had no clear reason for doing so; the double idea was always a mystery to Gail. Yet it kept growing stronger, widening the gulf between him and his wife.

Each of their temporary homes — the shack at the lumber camp in the drizzle of Hood Canal, the cabin under the snows of Mt. Shuckshan — felt emptier and more desolate to him than to her, woman though she was. Gail could not understand this. Lena did not openly regret their childlessness; but she failed either to condone or defend her lack of the primal instinct of her sex. Although Gail recognised that physically the fault might be his own, Arlene's indifference to motherhood gradually came to stir his resentment.

III

"To bury the matter here and now, Lena, I'll tell you about Martha. How I met her, and why we separated," began Gail at last, still staring at the floor. "Give me all the blame. I don't think I was heartless, but only undecided, weak. You knew my reputation before we married. For the time being almost any woman could turn my head. As to that, however miserable we've been, you've changed me."

He glanced at her from the corners of his eyes. Over her dishes Arlene nodded, grave, inert.

"I was nineteen. It was the year before I met you, and my third at the university," he went on, "when I saw Martha aboard the old stern-wheeler *Skagit*, on the Eagles' picnic up to Port Angeles in the Straits. She was with an insurance agent, a flabby beast I'd known named Negus, who later was jailed for shaving premiums. Martha had applied to him for work canvassing. You could tell right off that she was straight and well educated, ashamed and frightened of the man. It was before the Klondike rush, and she had wandered west from Duluth after her father — a mine superintendent in the iron country — was killed, and her mother went on the stage. She had a brother and a sister somewhere in Idaho that she wrote to, but I never saw them. And Harlow mightn't have been her real name, though I never knew any other." He paused. "I remember the moment I first saw her, by the pilot-house door, gazing at the crest of Mt. Baker. Her look was an appeal."

Gail's mind filled with an image of Martha then, so frail and dark and girlish, her black hair heaped in a half-circle over her low, smooth forehead; the fragile nose and wide, unclouded, deep-set eyes.

"I spoke to her. She smiled, answered, and that settled me. I loved her. . . . All the way up the Sound we sat alone behind the after wheel. Ashore in the picnic grove, Negus quit hovering around. Maybe he was sure by then that she'd thrown him down, or knew I wouldn't stand for his advances. He sulked and glowered at us; got drunk. She felt then that she was rid of him, and began to act almost like she'd lost her head. I felt I'd been protecting her, so what with her taking looks — not handsome, but honest and dependent sort of — I guess I lost my head, too. Next, as we

were starting back to Seattle, the fog rolled in from Cape Flattery, and the *Skagit's* skipper wouldn't leave the dock."

Gail coloured, bowing his head. Either to mark her unconcern, or emphasise her scorn, Arlene jerked up the plug in the sink, and as the bluish water trumpeted down the pipe, Gail spoke with a set jaw.

"You've been up to Angeles. You know the row of lime-kilns along shore above the town. Well, I shan't forget them — ever. . . . The white dust like powdered steel in your throat, and all night long the gleam of fire through chinks in those giant beehives made of clay. . . . In the woods just beyond them, we found a lean-to, all piled up with new spruce boughs. . . .

"We got back to town the next afternoon. I went right to Pelcher. You remember, who was putting me through the college, the man we had the nerve, or madness, to break with when we skipped off the next June. Perhaps I was a coward then. I was crazy to make good, to marry that girl on the spot. But Pelcher wouldn't hear of it. Said for any student to be saddled with a wife would ruin his future as a doctor. When I threatened to elope with her, he swore he'd stop my allowance, and had been wasting money on me. I pleaded with him, and he promised to look her up. One day he started to tell me she wasn't on the square. Well, I'd have smashed him. . . .

"But she was out of a job, and I couldn't support her. That was Pelcher's opportunity, and because I hesitated, afraid he'd throw me over — it was then I lost her. Martha and I had been meeting all the time in down-town joints, but I don't believe Pelcher ever saw her till the day he bought her off. She went to Vancouver. She only left a note for me at her board-

ing-house, saying that he was right, and it was useless for me to find her — how she'd done wrong to start with by leaving her brother and sister, and would be a millstone on my neck if we married, but should always love me." Gail's voice caught. . . . "I thought I got over it, and forgot, as I could in those days. . . .

"I never saw her again till three years later, two after I hitched to you. It was when we left the Sequalmie plant. I passed her about eleven one night on Second Avenue. Her clothes were pitiful. I tried to speak to her, but my throat gagged, and I thanked God she didn't see me. . . . Then only four months ago, before we got that last job at Olympia, I went into Minker's. She was biscuit-shooting there. It broke me all up, but she wouldn't say a word about herself. I gave her our address, and told her to write me if she ever needed any help. . . ."

Gail could not have continued, even were there more to say. For his first vision of her was tempered by that latest memory: the firm lips moist and crimson, drawn, yet turned upward with their old look of unquenchable cheer; that aspect, despite her frailty, of having incredible resources of strength; the stamp of what once, perhaps in childhood, had been beauty, showing through the scars of her degradations with an appalling vividness.

In the ensuing silence, Gail turned squarely toward Arlene. She leaned against the sink, staring into space. In her blond and squarish, immobile, somewhat Scandinavian features, he could read her concentration, as to Martha, upon those problems of their common sex apart from motherhood, which are yet exclusively the woman's realm, and in the looser life of the coast become superlative — poverty, the ache of lone-

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liness, of tawdry garments, of unremorseful wantonness.

"She oughtn't have let herself be bribed," muttered Lena in a while. "Never was made for the game in this country."

"I think I acted honest to Martha," declared Gail simply. "And some day I'm going to 'come back,' and do her the square thing."

"I hope you will, Gail. You were that sort once." Her tone conceded, even if against her experience, a faith in the innate chivalry that she had once believed he had.

"Then it's sure a verdict, coming from you," he said, with a tinge of hardness, lost on her.

"Still, I wish you'd sometimes acted to me with the spirit you showed for her," she added, dispiritedly.

Gail sprang to his feet.

"Then give me the chance, Lena!"

He heaved his shoulders, pulled himself together. He eyed her wistfully, as if an idea, familiar yet forgotten, were swiftly relighting his mind.

IV

"Another thing has been on my mind a long time, Lena, and I must tell you now." For the first time in months, Gail's manner was deliberately winning. "Please try to bear it. I know you can."

She betrayed her curiosity in a listless murmur.

"I think I'd better go away and leave you for a time," he said, in a voice faint but clear, and steeled so that he spoke without a tremor. "It'll be best in the end for both of us."

Arlene turned galvanically and faced him. Gail ran a hand through his bristling, sandy hair.

"Gabriel!" she breathed.

"Let me tell you the reasons. You've always been open-minded and shown common-sense."

"The letter —" she began, dully. "That woman."

"No!" he checked her with a toss of his head. "Her writing has nothing to do with this. That was just coincidence. I won't have you doubt me. For weeks I've had my mind set, and been screwing up my nerve to tell you we must separate — for a year, anyhow. So hear me out."

"You'll do what you want. You always have."

Her complacency both shamed and stimulated him. He had expected an outburst, opposition, to his proposal. Her resignation raised a lump in Gail's throat.

"I owe you a lot, Lena," he exclaimed. "At any rate, in the time we've been together you've taught me constancy."

Arlene, implacable, turned her back on him without speaking.

"I ought to leave you for your own sake," he went on rapidly. "I've worn the brains and ambition out of you, drudging for me in this tramp's life. I've got no right to drag you down any farther. I'm always going from bad to worse. No foreman will give me a job any more. Without me, you would have risen in the world, and I ought to give you a show before it's too late. Think of the ambitions your mother had for you, all crushed out. Your folks were different from mine to begin with, and raised to better things. There was my father from the East. He never told me who my mother was, so sometimes it wasn't hard — to guess when I was down by the tidelands —" his voice sank, and a flush invaded his sharp cheekbones.

"I don't see much difference between our fathers,"

said Arlene, moved by his selfcontempt. "What odds is there between forging land deeds at a mahogany desk in the Alaska Building, like mine, and dealing faro on Occidental Avenue, like yours? And as for ambitions—Oh, yes, I had them, as you knew. But it was all mother's idea to make me a home missionary. I might have had the brains and faith once, but never the patience."

"But doesn't she need you now, and wouldn't you be a help to her?" faltered Gail.

"Don't you think that my duty's here with you?" she asked, but without conviction.

"What have we got to live and give ourselves for?" he demanded. "Only this same sort of living, dragged on and on, in the next county, in Oregon, in Canada, until the end."

Again Gail started to pace up and down, with his muscular awkwardness. His deep chest, the lithe powerful frame under the leather belt of his worn trousers, contrasted oddly with the slight sag of one shoulder.

"I've never known what's been wrong with me," he went on. "I've never understood what most people in this country live and work for. The motives that run men here always seemed queer and foolish. They scour these mountains for coal and gold. They sit on their claims in rags and without a cent, living in a dream—that comes true once in a thousand times—of the day when capital will come along and hand them millions. Yet they're so dead sure. And if one does strike it rich, the next week he throws away every dollar into some wildcat timber deal. But he thinks he's a hero and a martyr for trying to 'open up the country.' For whom, and why? If he's got any kids the stake is lost

by the time it could give them a living, and they have to take up the same sort of useless life, or hang on like us. Men with such hunches belong to some world I can't conceive. Maybe I was born too soon, or too late, or too far east, for this country. I know I'm a gambler's son, but I haven't got a drop of the gambler's blood. A throw-back, likely. But to what? And look at the rich men in Seattle and their wives and children, if they have any. Drunkards, or worse."

"You believe all you read in the Sunday papers?" put in Lena.

"And yet this is the youngest world, isn't it?" persisted Gail. "The last part of the earth to be settled up? It's all a mystery to me—all so complicated. But I've got to learn about it. I tried with you, and failed, so let me go it by myself a while."

"You didn't used to talk stuff like this," said Arlene after a pause. "You were stronger, manlier, once. You used to throw off a sort of power made people do anything you chose."

"And you used to be—" he raised a hand, "a kind of inspiration. So keen and vigorous, and right in everything you said."

"I know. I've lost my spirit, and maybe it was you that killed it. But it's more unnatural for a man to have softened in five years of work like ours than for a woman."

"Lena, I guess we're both too honest with ourselves ever to have succeeded."

For a moment Gail stared blankly through the window beside the sink, thinking.

"Yes, something's weakened me. There must have been some kind of nourishment I needed and didn't get," he suggested. A restless light filled his eyes. "I have

kind of wasted. But you take one of these big Douglas firs and plant it east of the mountains. No other trees spring up around it, so it dies. That's like me. There's nothing of us two to keep on living afterwards."

"Leave me! Do what you please," said the woman, dreading that he was about to touch upon the raw theme of their barrenness.

Gail stopped at her side. He seized her spasmodically in his arms, and crushing her yellow head against his bosom, let her go again like lightning.

"Don't!" she repulsed him. "You're thinking of her — of your Martha."

"No, no. Of you, not of them," he rasped, through the lump rising in his throat. "They don't mean anything to me now. How could they?"

"They — them —?" gaped Lena, her blue eyes flashing. "So there's a pair of them. I thought so. Why didn't you tell me? And one's — her child!"

"Why — yes —" admitted Gail, bewildered, reaching into his jumper. He opened the letter of the night before. "'We,' she says. Two of them. I didn't finish this, or realise. I was too dazed to think. Then probably —"

His dark, angular features had lighted wondrously, with a virile glow which Lena had not seen in them for years. His upper lip crinkled upward, doubling, as it always did when he smiled. "Maybe there is another," he admitted, awedly, thrusting back the letter. "And — we're saved. . . !"

"Her child — yours — you knew it all along," she burst out. "You were only throwing dust in my eyes with all that talk about my better future. You wanted to leave me for your kid."

"I tell you I never thought of that," declared Gail,

taking her firmly by the wrists. "I promise you I won't go back to her. It's too late, anyway. And you must take my word for this, too. I've never broken it to you, have I?"

"Never. But the kid was all the reason," she charged obstinately.

"What sort of a creature are you?" he breathed, tossing her hands aside. "After our five years together, you let me go without a word. You can't be jealous of the woman, yet you can of the child, my child." He sank back on the sofa. "In some ways you've grown bitter — cold in your soul. Ah, Lena, Lena, how I pity you. It's you who pay, who suffer in the end."

Arlene, unrelenting, turned back to the sink, and began wiping her pile of dishes.

"You're not going to-day?" she asked.

"No. Oh, no," murmured Gail. "I'll have to settle with the fruit people. But the way looks clearer —"

He glanced up at her, and never before had her fecund aspect appeared so deceptive: her plump bust and arms, the blue, bird-like eyes, under masses of hemp-like hair, her full cheeks, still unmarred by lines of suffering, and retaining the fleshy bloom of the damp Pacific air. He watched the cleft in her sharp chin, the key to her malleable nature, deepen.

Then, closing his eyes, Gail ran a hand through the coarse, mouse-colored hair that grew low about his broad temples. It had a glossy, concave uprightness, like the inside of sea shells. He wrinkled his forehead, elevated the outer edges of his eyebrows in a way peculiar to him. Heavy and black by contrast with his hair, they ended abruptly at his nose. Raised thus, and with his high cheek-bones which always seemed tipped with sun-

burn as if by some shiny pigment, they gave him a savage, Indian-like look. His dark, dominant eyes were lit with an infectious radiance that had never before transformed them so. His long upper lip still doubled itself with a faint, amazed smile, which was without any stain of the discontent that usually marred his features. The slight pucker around his nostrils twitched and quivered involuntarily.

Arlene, who had so weakly consented that the bond of a lifetime be broken, who had so endured her husband's love for another woman, had stiffened into a being morose and brooding at the hint of his nameless child. And this had inspired and uplifted Gail, to whose sullen will all life had become so blasted, into a man who could pity and could hope. They had each stepped into a new world at this knowledge of a generation not their own.

A shadow passed the window, and footsteps sounded on the porch outside. The door rattled open, and the Sunday paper thumped into the middle of the kitchen floor. The ruddy face of Tod Benson, the station-master's boy, peered over the latch.

"Hey, you, Gail Fain," he geyed through his hare lip. "You outer bed yet?"—and was gone again.

Gail thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and stepping to the window, watched him pass down the trail, trying vainly to whistle, across the great checkerboard of the strawberry beds.

CHAPTER II

THE AWAKENING

I

HARDLY had Gail turned from the window, when it was darkened by another shadow which moved more swiftly. For an instant the idea filled him that Martha herself, now as a wanderer in the lonely places alike of city and wilderness, might have desperately traced him. But sight of the large figure that swayed up the trail dispelled such a misgiving. He recognised the tight mauve coat, the flashing rings, the coal-scuttle hat. It was Madge Arnold, Lena's sole friend of her own sex, the one woman from whom she had accepted compassion after her parents' tragedy, who alone had stuck to Lena in her vagrant life with Gail; yet whom he disliked for her perverse cast of mind and dominating personality.

Although she had not visited them for months, Madge had the habit on Sundays of taking the train to wherever Gail might be working, and gossiping with his wife. The two women had been chums at high school; later Madge had married a young labour contractor, Wilbur Arnold, who had since made a fortune speculating in Alaska salmon canneries. In her company there leaped out in Arlene all the darker qualities (perhaps the dower of her father's blood) which she had learned to stifle in the face of Gail's blind ideality. Her resigned steadfastness and dogged loyalty to him dissolved in the presence of this big, harsh-voiced woman, ever at war with a growing fleshiness.

"It's her. That side-partner of yours. I've been hoping she'd forgotten us," said Gail, as a knock sounded on the door. "I'm going in here to-day."

He stepped into the bunkroom, leaving the newspapers scattered on the floor. He slammed to the door, and threw himself upon the grey blankets of the bed. Usually Madge drove him to scour the surrounding country alone; but after his show-down with Lena, Gail shrank from leaving them alone. At least, knowing that he was behind the thin board partition they should curb their tongues.

He had a son. At once he eagerly took from his pocket the letter of which he had read so little and comprehended less. He propped his head upon an arm, hearing the brisk voices of the women's greeting. And now the very knowledge that the phrases, which last night had ran blurred in his eyes, were ten days old, made them doubly vivid, emergent in their call:

"May 2d. Friend Gabriel," it began (there was no address). "As you told me when I saw you at Minker's to write if I was in real trouble, I take this opportunity to do so. I have lost my job there owing to sickness, and we are still both very bad with white sore throats. Really I must be out of my senses, but the lodging people are very kind, though their patience won't last forever. I don't want to ask for money, but only for a kind of help, and that you come to see me before we have to go away. Since you have a wife, I know I have no business to ask this, and it must be hard for her when you tell. But you said last November that she was kind and liberal, so please come."

He had stopped here before. He cursed the chatter through the wall, but it seemed to dim as he went on —

"I was going to send you his tintype, but I lost it. If you should take to him, then blame me for not telling you that time in Minker's how I had him. I couldn't. He'll be six next month, but rather thin and pinched for his age. Of course I think he looks like his dad, and I've named him for you, though he can't be baptised. . . .

"But what I wanted to say was, maybe this is your only way to see him. I've had an offer of work down in Oregon, though it doesn't begin till the fall. And it's going to be hard work, at a mangle in the Eureka Laundry, but I think I ought to take it for his sake. I may not be able to earn enough money for us both there, so I thought perhaps if you hadn't too many children, and your wife was accommodating, you might care for him till I was on my feet. Lots of people have been good to me, but none like you, none I allowed to be. The hop season will be here soon, and I can earn enough picking until we go, if you'll only take him! I could pay you for his keep after a time, though it may take a year or two until I save something. I know it's an unheard-of thing to ask, and I have no hold on you because of him. . . .

"But if you don't take him, and I can't support us, it's all up.

"Your Martha."

Gail gulped. A blot had splashed on the paper; from her eyes. His own filled. He drove back the hot tears. He pressed the letter to his lips and kissed it fiercely.

Martha — still pure and true to him. Martha — once so trustful and loving, ever so much a part of him. He believed that he had not thought of her for years.

But always she had haunted his mind. What fate had separated them from a happy life!

What mattered now his threat, even his promises, to Lena!

II

The strident tones of Arlene and Madge broke in. Through the welter of pain and dawning courage into which his mind lapsed, he finally heard what they were saying. He did not want to listen, but he could hardly help it.

"I put it up to my Wilbur before he sailed North this year," came Madge's Seattle twang. "I says that if he was going to spend so much time in that godforsaken Alaska, he needn't exact promises of behaviour from me that I couldn't get from him. But he argued that there wasn't white women of any sort where he goes. 'But squaws,' I says. 'What's the matter with them?' You know that Siwash story."

Their voices fell. Gail heard Lena's laugh, and its vacancy set his teeth on edge. The acute and empty Madge always turned her head, carried her away, left her more obstinate, nagging, difficult to get along with.

"Did Wilbur give you his word?" asked Lena.

"He certainly has," affirmed the other. "Wilbur was always reasonable—in his talk. But you know me well enough to understand I haven't any particular temptations with men. Still, you ought to make a husband think you have. It holds him, and I've got to be sure of Wilbur till we put our new salmon deal through."

"Is that the only big job you have on?" questioned Lena, admiringly. Gail abhorred her envy of Madge's wealth, of the woman's scathing, superficial cleverness.

"Except the Atna River townsite up there. Lamar and his crowd are having trouble with a gang of farmers

from Idaho, downright fool claim-jumpers. But we've got the Government and the Copper Trust both back of us, which means the courts and the marshals in Alaska. Wilbur says that Hartline crowd will be thrown out by the scruffs of their fly-bitten necks this very summer. Still, he's only got a small interest there, and mayn't have to mush over Torlina way. Charles Lamar's the smartest man up North."

In the pause, Gail pictured the woman's patronising air, and Arlene gazing at her in adulation, turning over in the back of her mind some crumb of Madge's opinions.

"Yes, I've often thought I might have held Gail better if I'd made some play to other men," harked back Lena in a whisper, plainly that he should not hear. Gail pressed his ear closer to the bare boards with the rack of picture post-cards left by the cabin's last denizen. "But we've never been near a likely one long enough, and Gail's been straight enough in most things."

His ears tingled, in a hot flood of shame for the eaves-dropping. Ah, but could Lena never be so frank with him!

"No, I guess you're like me in that," twanged on Madge. "You're one of us western women from your feet up. And the best in the world to make a man of a loafing husband — though it does seem how you haven't."

"Yes, it's been awful. He's really no good," agreed Arlene, in the dissatisfied, querulous strain that Madge inspired. Then, sharply, "But cut it, won't you? He's in there."

Gail winced, in a mounting anger.

"So about our salmon," resumed the other, ostentatiously raising her voice. "It's a dirty business, but

there certainly is money in it, if you stand in with the Government. Wilbur ought to be back this fall with a good tainted million in his jeans for selling out to the trust."

"How did he work it?"

"Bought our last year's pack. It made a big showing when their agent saw it piled on the wharf. But for a fact, there's hardly a salmon, except 'humpbacks,' left in any crick flowing into Katchak Bay. We've fished her out down to the last parr, and that means she'll stay barren till kingdom come," chuckled Madge. "They're stung, all right."

"Then you must have put up weirs, or never restocked."

"Both. The fish inspector just fell over himself to be bought off. The old trimmer, in on the ground floor," she sneered, "of 'the nation's resources to conserve for the whole people.'"

Gail stirred on the bed in an uneasy, instinctive disgust. And yet how dejectedly he had voiced his ignorance of pioneering half an hour gone.

"But Wilbur and I do need the price. What have I been slaving for all these years to make us a place to fill in Seattle society, if we can't enjoy it?"

"You don't mean to say that you're going to live in Seattle when you've salted down that million?" asked Arlene. "I didn't know that folks fixed like you ever stayed in the Northwest. I hear even the ranchers east of the mountains don't, after they've laid enough by. This country won't take to the home feeling. It ain't like California. But doesn't the East read a sight of rot about it, put out by the railroads?"

Gail recoiled; yet was not this but an echo of himself, of that self that now seemed long dead and buried?

"I'd like to find any other town that would stand for me," said Mrs. Arnold, grimly.

A silence. Then Lena ventured —

"Do you ever feel it's a pity that you've got no children to share all your money with?"

Gail started, craning forward, fixing his eyes on the cracked mirror of the bare bureau-washstand. Was she, as never with him, about to unbosom herself to this woman, and on that matter closest to his dreams?

"Why should I, dear?" retorted Madge, with a mock archness. "We women out here may put gumption into our men-folks, but as Wilbur says, never *marry* one of us, if you hanker for a home. You think I want a lot of rakes to blow our money in? Get and enjoy yourself, I say, live while we can, for we can't suffer nor rejoice when we're dead and gone, no matter what the churches used to say. There's always plenty to come up from the ranks and take your place in the world. I believe that it ain't right in a democracy like ours for more than one generation to spend what it earns by the sweat of its brow. It ain't fair to the ones that want to rise. Our country's founded on the principle of giving everyone a show."

A loathing for her flooded Gail; less her brutal frankness than her monstrous philosophy revulsed him. He banged his foot against the frail partition; but, unheeding, Madge continued her corroding valedictory.

"If the people who first come to this coast had kept up that family idea, Wilbur and I might not have our share of property now. They've got the richest land in the world out here, there's no other white man's country left on the shores of this Pacific Ocean. It's God's youngest world, all right, and the Lord made it for smarter things than breeding. And I'll bet you

there ain't a happier woman in the whole city of Seattle than Madge Arnold."

"So you'd have us all like your salmon bay," pondered Lena. "Like this whole western country, to be honest. Exhausted and used up, when it ought to be hardly scratched. Like the timber and fish at the rate they're going. Killing the goose and smashing her golden eggs."

"Well, ain't it our goose, to do with as we see fit?" challenged Madge. "Why should we be responsible for them that comes after us? Let 'em shift for themselves, like we have."

"But your way, there won't be any coming after," argued Lena. "Still, I naturally do agree with you" — always she parroted Madge — "but don't you let Gail hear us."

Yet clearly they had both forgotten him. Gail was on his feet, his face fixed like a mask of iron. Reckless, passionate, many of his deeds had been, but never such nauseating thoughts. . . . That pair! Were all wives in this young, free world of the West like them — typical, as Madge had said — so selfish, sordid, blighting? Never! Somewhere must exist the innocent, the brave, the hopeful; women who had faith in themselves, in whom they loved, in this new, chaotic land. . . . Like Martha. And there sprang out in Gail's mind one unseating memory of her; her gaze backward from the *Skagit's* deck as they left Port Angeles that palpitant morning; her pointing to the bluish haze over the lime-kilns, as she said, "Don't tell me — love burns out that way."

He stiffened, at the impact of an overpowering impulse. Then, from Madge:

"In some ways, Lena, I've always thought you a very easy woman. A girl who bears the brunt of her husband's failures like you do, don't get much out of life. You was made to cut a bigger figure out in this country. Now, I wish you'd come back to town with me, and take a vacation. We two could have a big time nights, crashing around in Wilbur's motor, at the Berlin café and places like that. It might put a crimp into your Angel Gabriel to hear you had a fling."

Gail felt himself trembling in every limb as he awaited Arlene's answer; but he did not recognise the rage that shook him, until his wife, starting with peevish discontent, had concluded saying —

"I don't know but what I might, Madge. Gail has just said that he was fixed to quit me, only for a time, but I suspect he means for good. I'm allowing him to go, but I don't want to let on how willingly. The one reason that riles me is that he's heard from a woman he used to live with. She had a kid by him. Yes, he treated her square, and I wouldn't kick at his paying *her* a visit. She's been sick, and he won't take up with her for good. He's promised me that, and you can generally believe Gail. But just the idea of his seeing that kid some day — his own flesh and blood which I haven't got him — I can't begin to stand that." She paused, to add with a flash of cruelty, "It makes me feel like the very hell —"

Livid, Gail flung open the door. The kitchen swam before him. His fingers tightened into his palms. The idea of a moment back flamed through him, into a resolution.

Martha, the boy, suffering down there. . . . Here, these false, despoiling creatures. . . .

III

Mrs. Arnold, the purple cloak thrown back, in an ample, open-work shirtwaist which pricked out her white and flaccid skin, lolled on the horsehair sofa. With the bronze hair piled over her steamed features, the fuzz along her upper lip, she was like some big reptile, a reddish salamander.

Back-to by the stove, Lena was hanging up her dish-towels. She had put on Madge's scoop hat with its waving green willow-plumes.

She turned, open-mouthed, as Gail's guttural voice confronted, cut in on them. Madge raised herself with a glance at her chum, first amused, but instantly inciting, hateful.

"I'm leaving you right off, Lena," Gail gripped himself. "And I want to eat my words about not going to Martha. . . . The down train's due in fifteen minutes."

He quaked with excitement. His large Adam's apple vibrated.

"You're going to her, for your boy," she beset him angrily, yet overawed. "Don't you bring him back here. I couldn't stand it."

"He wouldn't dare, dearie," broke in Madge, with a soft taunt. "A loafer like him."

"That's just what I — will do," Gail's voice shook. "It's the only chance to redeem you, to do the decent and just thing by Martha. She wants me to take the kid for a while." His eyes danced. "You're my wife. You've got to stand it. And I forbid your traveling with this woman."

"He's been spying on us, Lena," whined she, her face

hardening terribly. "But what should you care? You come with me. He can't stop you."

"Understand, Arlene, I'm not quitting you for good," Gail ignored her, squaring himself before his wife. "We'll work all this business out, you and I, right here and now."

The women glared at him, speechless, overcome. Madge, with an effort at truculence, rose and smoothed with both hands the long coat over her hips. Gail fumbled in his pockets, and drew out three ten dollar bills and some silver.

"It's all the money we have," he said quietly. "There — take this. I may need the rest," and he crushed one of the notes into Lena's limp hand.

For the second time, Gail's arms folded around her. She could not resist. Their faces met — those features which each knew so well down to their tiniest lines; which in the eyes of each had undergone the creeping changes that passion, revulsion, in their infinite grades, conspiring with the years to mystify them — to hold together, to separate them — had etched there.

Gail kissed her, thrust her from him. The showy hat fell to the floor. He threw open the porch door.

"Don't. Don't leave me, Gail," she gasped, oblivious of Madge, her small eyes moistening. "Come back!"

Gail heard Mrs. Arnold muster a man's oath.

The door slammed behind him. He was outside among the innumerable parallels of the strawberry vines.

CHAPTER III

THE CITY OF DREAMS

I

GAIL hurried down the trail toward the station. The clear sky, the sunny May air, the dense and gigantic forests all about, soothed and inspired him with an unfamiliar sense of freedom. The lush vines and dank soil, the redolent spruciness that he inhaled, never before had spoken to him so keenly of the wide-worldliness of living. The even rows of the strawberry plants seemed to touch him gently, as with the points of countless flails. They were like the revolving spokes of two huge wheels, which ground him forward irresistibly.

His boy! Through all his wastrel years, he had loved no living thing more than his own strong body. And now it lay re-imaged in his blood and sinew, somewhere yonder behind the haze over those sombre fir-tops, out there in the Youngest World.

Life had begun anew.

He sprang upon the rotting boardwalk that led into the settlement. He sped through the dense undergrowth of bracken ferns, among the frame shacks streaked with moisture. He passed the "Cadillac Hotel," its shingles bulging with moss nourished by the ten months of drizzle, the "No Minors Allowed" sign in a bar window.

In the railroad station, the grey-haired, torpid station-master banged up the ticket window, drew on his bombazine sleevelets. Gail paid his fare. The shriek

of an approaching engine reverberated through the wilderness. The down local, as he knew, stopped for hardly a minute. Out on the platform he swung into the smoking-car, to a parting shout from the hair-lipped boy, who was eating strawberries on an express crate.

But he was off!—and filled again with his exalted musings. They swarmed through the open windows of the car, in the alternating lights and darknesses of the virgin forest, from dismal cedar swamps, out of the chaos of lumber-camps.

The boy would regenerate Lena. And what a mother she might become, if dowered with a mother's lovingness! They three would move east of the Cascades and begin life over again. He would acquire the power of the West's ambitions, whose spell had always been so closed a book to him. He would feel its fervour to construct and to possess, to wrest riches cleanly from the soil, to tame a space of the wilderness with his hands, as a home for his blood forever.

Thus the gates of thought in Gail opened slowly, from the point to which his life at college had swung them, and his married, unproductive years had riveted them. The habit which he had had to conceive shadowy figments of chemical discovery had long lain in abeyance. His mind's penetrating, imaginative power had grown dull. Now visions far more dazzling for being rooted within the heart of all the inexplicable turmoil of life possessed him, reawakened that power, sharpened and stimulated it.

An arrogant sense of his creative manhood filled him. He felt no guilt at quitting the cabin. The inspiration of his quest smothered any pang of regret. After all, Lena, not he, was the sterile one.

Then, as was usual with Gail, a sense of his own unworthiness overtook him; and with this, a certain hard frankness toward himself, which he had felt seldom since his student days. He weighed his ill-repute in most camps west of the mountains. . . . "That Thain, the gambler's son," foremen told their chiefs to assure a refusal of his application for a job. "If he ever had any of his father's grit or smartness, his college education spoiled them. Used to captain the university ball team. Run away with that speculator's daughter. But I see she still prefers to cook for him," they would add, with the perverse gallantry of the frontier. . . . Gail gritted his teeth. All that was past and over.

He accounted largely for his apathies by the fact that he was an Easterner, from a town in Iowa, so his father had told him. He felt that he was born to be out of touch with the ardour of the West. He had come to Seattle when too young to remember the journey. His earliest recollection was of the old man's gambling place and the grizzled men from a gold-strike in British Columbia, with their raw-hide pokes of dust; the sleek, stout "regulars," the stooping young "remittance men," who spoke with British "a's" and no one respected, lumping them sneeringly with Easterners, as beings who were wasteful and parasitic. And his father when drunk, or when the braced wheel went against the house, would curse the western country, gripping his long moustaches as they crawled to bed in the choked sunlight of their alcove behind the baize table piled with faro cases. Or then he might talk of having once owned a lumber mill, of captaining a salmon schooner; of his "nice folks" in the East, with whom he had quarrelled, over a debt, or a theft, or a woman — the version varied.

These were Gail's first impressions of a home, up to the day that the book-maker put four bullets into the old man's abdomen at the Meadows race-course. It was a week later that Nick Pelcher (one of the regulars, president though he was of a national bank) offered the boy an education, after he had won two events in the A. O. H. athletic meet at Madison Park one drizzling Labour Day.

But Lena was indelibly of the West, in root and bloom and fibre. "The last clean-up of 'forty-niners who always staked too wisely to pan a fortune," she had said bitterly on the day Gail lost his job at the oyster farm.

Thus, as the passing forests along the railway thinned, the contradiction bewildered him: The opulent frontier and Lena: the East, so reproached for being barren and worn out, and his ache for a fleshy continuance of his own being.

II

A hand pressed his shoulder, a voice demanded his ticket. Aroused thus to look about his car, he saw that he was alone in it. He began to scout an illusion that it was traveling cityward as an especial convoy for him. The country outside had been transformed by the even-rowed, white-washed peachtrees of farms, fenced in as if by dykes against the spinous tides of the forest. There were acres of rank potato-fields, tall raspberry vines, pale hops creeping up their brushy climbs. He felt his happiness to be somehow inherent in all that passing luxuriance, to be clicked and iterated by the turning car-wheels, as by a voice from the mountainous vast behind, in a chant that grew tenser and more moving the nearer the teeming city drew.

His thoughts set into a seethe.

All about him, with patience and self-denial, men tamed this wilderness. Never before in his twenty-five years of living had the badges of toil appeared so alluring. Never before had this Youngest World of his smiled so through its scars. Now, if ever, was his time to master the lesson of why its pioneers excelled him in every attainment. Why should he distrust their toil as vain, the land's fertility as useless, its youthful life as blighted by complexity? He, too, was a pioneer by circumstance, in everything except his soul. Speeding now along this chain of mills and barnyards, of stores and fruitfields, he saw himself as a link separate from it, a link cast outside. He felt that his future and his son's hung upon his forging himself within that chain. In this momentary freedom which he had seized, he must grapple with the problem of his futility — freed from the yearning of idle years, from all their chagrins and trivialities.

All at once he tingled with an inner gleam. It was mingled with self-reproach, but it seemed to him to be a flash of fundamental wisdom. This: Was it possible that work was no less divine than fatherhood? That to beget and to labour could not be divided?

Did not his fellow-men wrestle with the land for wheat and gold, in order to assure the life of their children? Had they all not hewn and hungered, while he had only growled and coveted, guided by the same deep instinct of mankind: To recast their bodies endlessly? In his fret for a son, had he not blindly put the cart before the horse? Cried for the house without building the scaffold? Asked for coal to burn without sweating in the mine?

III

He started up in the slant light of afternoon. The train was rumbling across piles, and he smelt the saltiness of black mud at low tide. There to the right rose shattered cliffs of clay, the reddish, unweathered joists of new dwellings perched above the roar and trumpeting of sawmills. To the left, under a cloud of sea-gulls swinging over the tidelands, a glimmer of deep water, snowy mountain-peaks beyond: Seattle, gorging herself upon her hills, an adamantine blur under brownish coal smoke, edged with the tattered giants of the forests that she seemed eating into like a sore.

As the train stopped under the shed on the docks, Gail remembered that Martha's letter gave no address. But surely someone in the lunchroom knew where she lived. He ran through the station, crossed under the monstrous emblem of Totem Square, and reaching Second Avenue boarded a Pike Street trolley.

The blond lady behind the gas-cookers of Minker's window received his questions languidly. She pressed a button in her cage. A small, sallow man in a black alpaca jacket stepped forward and answered Gail with condescension. No: Miss Thain had left there two weeks ago. Did any of the serving ladies know where she roomed? The manager turned to them. Hardly; so Gail gathered more from a general raising of their eyebrows and a prodding of hair with pencils, than from the lips of any aproned girl at her stone-topped table. Miss Thain (his name, again!) had kept to herself, one of them volunteered, had no friends that she knew of. Only the assistant manager, said their interlocutor, who came on at midnight to fine for breakage, knew the girls' addresses, and it was against the

rules to tell them to strangers. Still, he might ask the night man.

"She's my — wife!" blurted Gail, crimson, clenching his fists, for that sallow imp had begun to smirk.

Midnight. So he would have to wait till then. The girls drew together and whispered in a conscious disregard of the handsome, rather weary-looking youth in the blue jacket and baggy khaki, standing there dazed, in the smell of coffee and browning sinkers. He turned to the door. A street-car conductor was shoving the blond lady a dollar. She made a show of rattling his change and pinioning the check behind her bowl of toothpicks. Gail followed him to the street.

He threaded the crowds of Second Avenue, toward the sordid, swarming region, then "unrestricted," south of the Yesler Way. That was Seattle to him, Seattle to the West's far-flung manhood, the city destined as the world's last metropolis — the City of Dreams. There gathered the best and the worst men of the new century, the alertest and the weariest, the most brave and the most weak, upon the final frontier.

To dream, but to Work. That was the watchword of the city, as it offered promises as golden as men have ever heard. The price: toil, brains, and gold — but chiefly toil — for its harsh endeavours and costly risks. And the toilers, heavy-booted men clad in mackinaws, shuffling unceasingly along those streets below the "dead-line." Seattle battened upon them; and they, according to the will or the genius in them, the sinew in the back of each, the youth in his soul, fulfilled or rejected her chimeras.

Here swarmed a floating populace such as no other city in times of peace ever focussed upon its streets. Gail knew them — the outcasts of industry, the peas-

antry of adventure; men born without hope, men whose wealth and valour were their visions; men to whom labour was life, to whom it was mortification. He knew, too, their gods and their devils, the leaded dice and the doctored whisky, the fluffed and flabby creatures of the long, fetid crib-houses; the strike-leaders with thin lips, the strike-breakers with thinner hearts, and the haggard corner-preachers of an effortless Utopia. Gail knew them all — the philosophers, jesters, assassins of the City of Dreams.

Along Occidental Avenue the click of pool-balls issued out of cellars. Salmon and hamburger-and-onions sizzled across the enamel cloth of street booths. A crowd surrounded a cart-tail dentist, as he extracted teeth from a stout, brown-faced man, who spat blood and grinned sheepishly. On the next corner a slant-shouldered, bearded Slav in a linen duster was lambasting the Tsar of Rooshia, preaching socialism, atheism, and quoting the Rubaiyat (as the work of a Greek poet) all in one breath. And each drab ring of loiterers listened on silently, intently, but unmoved. The prophet flung out to them promises of salvation wrapped in murder, as thanklessly as his brother quack distributed sample phials in envelopes. Yet Gail knew that the thoughts of all those unshaven faces, under their weathered felt hats, were strong and reached far away. He might be blind to the remoter ends of pioneering in the distant opens, yet he also had felt the goad of hunger; and this was his old haunt, these men were his familiars from boyhood, and he was one of them. The man next him was weighing, perhaps, whether he should ship on the next day's steamer for Alaska, to hold a No. 2 drill on some gale-swept ledge in the blue shadow of a glacier. Maybe he could earn

a grubstake there, and his life would brighten again, hitting the dim trail on some stampede to new gold placers. Another doggedly reckoned the wages for lumber-jacks that were stencilled on the red and green placards outside the many employment offices, which shaved the worth of human fibre to the odd cent. Brawn was lured to the skids in fractions of a dime. The number of quarts of beans he must boil a day challenged any cook on the street, and if his fare would be paid out from the city or not.

Evening drew on. Across the Sound, the late sun, sinking behind the sharp Olympic peaks, withdrew his flush from their snowfields, like blood fading from living flesh. The sky darkened under the pitchy belching from some power station, the benediction of Toil upon her multitude. In a sudden hush, the pavements waxed resonant with the *sfft* of feet. High on the hill above, the light-ringed dome of the city hall leaped into incandescence.

The multitude. It began to overcome him that these visions which he grasped with its feelings, saw with its eyes, he had always known and felt. Yet not until this moment, as he heard those Salvation Army lassies there on the corner of First Avenue chanting about their lithographed hereafter, had his heart opened upon the multitude's desires, ready to tremble at the pathos of them, to kindle with its hopes. Sympathy — that was no word for it. He yearned to merge himself with the crowds, to endure and to dream as an atom of the swarm.

IV

The darkness had increased the turmoil of the streets. A gasolene flare hissed over a tray of files and pocket-

knives, under the tarnished balls of a pawn-shop. A seller of songs without the music hobbled past on a crutch, shouting. Against the dead-wall of the "Paris" crib-house opposite, a barker pointed to the sinister lines of a boycott poster. Where the dentist had stood, a pock-marked phrenologist, shouting that he had been ordained a Catholic priest, peddled fate in black gloves and a Prince Albert coat. A street-evangelist arose on the atheist's corner, and began to varnish souls with brimstone. "I t'ank dem fellers is all a trust," said a lanky Dane at Gail's side.

Trolley cars buzzed past, shattering the brooding circles of listeners, which instantly contracted. The lacquered sheen of a big motor car swayed along, and dumped its tailored burdens at the foot of a narrow stairway that shot up to thick-curtained windows in the middle of the block. Gail remembered the number of the house, but a new name was painted on the lighted glass transom. Never had such a place seemed so hideous. For today his body was sacred. It was years since he had felt so young, so fresh in spirit.

And not a woman was in sight, except the lean Salvation girls, and they were singing in Swedish, as if Swegians alone deserved, or needed, saving. Men, everywhere and only men. The flavour of the male was surfeiting; the feel of his latent power to subdue and populate, appalling. Woman was hidden behind furtive walls; a chattel, soulless, diverting, that entered men's talk to break it off with chuckles. Thieves and gamblers, even, thereabout prized their spark of sex. Whatever hope or aim in life, however dim, burned on anyone's horizon in his present purgatory—however halting its pursuit—women were but coloured toys. Man expected the paint on them to be poisonous.

Why? The bodies of the multitude, as well, were sacred to themselves.

And what was the deeper aim of each man about him? Of the cooks, lumber-jacks, pickpockets in the blaze of these feverish streets? And uptown, in their cushioned homes and leather-chaired hotels, no less of the railway Aladdins, the jowled timber and salmon kings? To weld himself into these surrounding chains of life, as he had resolved on the train, he must read the purposes and ends of many men, and why they were such and such. And that should not be hard. For whoever had not attained his goal, nursed a void in his soul; and friendships were the bridges cast out upon voids. And if any man had gained his desire, he would burn to confide how.

It seemed as if some strength outside himself faced him toward new aspirations. It was as though a detached intelligence, inherently good, had begun to guide him; Nature, perhaps, seeking blindly to restore his defects of her own making. He would study the multitude, searching all men for the brooding thirsts, the voids and treasures in their souls.

His mind groped from this fog of speculation, with a shy sense of its heightened simplicity. He was standing in front of the big plate glass of a dazzling window filled with union underwear. Blue placards labelled the limp, whitish suits with "cut" prices. Beside him, with hands in his pockets, was a red-haired, freckled youth in a plaid mackinaw twice too big for him and a skull cap too small. His wide brown eyes and a sharp chin gave him a bull-dog kind of look, but the two deep lines at each side of his mouth were sad and shadowy.

That mother's son, also, nursed his void.

v

Across the street, "Fish Dinner" zigzagged upon a window in letters made by soap reminded Gail that he had not eaten since breakfast. In there, he sat on a stool by the counter over his oyster fry, grasping a thick mug of coffee. Outside again, he entered the fake-mahogany splendour of a saloon and gulped a glass of beer. Through the swinging doors of others, he heard the arguments at the bars wax more vociferous as the night advanced. He bought an "Appeal to Reason" from a stunted boy in a grey sweater, and, plunging below the sidewalk, paid a dime at the ticket-coop of the Mascot Theatre to read it there. But on his bench in the cellar, which smelt of sour molasses, he found that the tramp on the cramped stage handled a homelier philosophy, as he sang:

For happiness your hearts to stir,
The gifts of birth and wealth are not the way.
It makes no difference what you were —
It's what you are today.

Then his dormant foreboding about the boy and Martha restlessly drew him up to the streets. He threw the "Appeal" into the gutter. The doors of a saloon on the diagonal corner flung open, and a crowd of men tumbled into the street, running backwards as they reached its middle. A beer bottle whizzed over their heads and crashed on the asphalt. Two policemen closed in on the throng, and a Navy bluejacket's flat hat shot up from its swaying heart. There was a moment of shouts and struggling, but no shots; in the phrenologist's audience close by, scarcely a head turned about. Then silence, dispersal; the sailor walked away

between the two patrolmen, dogged by the boy in the grey sweater. Lawlessness on the last frontier, that.

But it was then, in the ensuing hush, as the drone of the renegade priest filled the street again, that Gail noticed the covered buggy with the big bay horse in front of the New England Hotel—"Beds 15, 25, 35 cts," on its dim-lit sign. It struck him as a neat, shiny rig for that part of town. An old man in thick spectacles and a straw hat was standing at the kerb, talking earnestly to the driver. His hands kept trembling as he spoke. Suddenly he backed off, turned, and hurried up the stairway to the New England's office, whose lights shone out over the big hardware store on the street floor. A whip flecked the bay, and the buggy started up Occidental Avenue to the blare of a foot-gong on the dashboard.

A remote twinge of apprehension stirred Gail. He found himself asking a beefy man at his side, who was whistling softly, if he knew who owned the rig.

"The city saw-bones,"—interjected into his tune.

"The's always dames suiciding in them temperance dumps."

A doctor! He might need one. What were white sore throats?

"Where's his office? I've got a sick friend."

"Ought to be in the city hall, eh? But she'll be closed now."

Yet what use, until he knew the address? He would get a doctor the first thing in the morning. . . .

At eleven o'clock, Gail stood at an uptown corner, far from the Yesler Way. Here was the centre of Seattle's less sordid night life, where, unlike the Mascot, one might encounter the pioneers who had built the

town, with their wives or women, the ilk of Nick Pelcher and Wilbur Arnold — the idols to whom the multitude in shoe packs and mackinaws must sell their vigour and mortgage their dreams.

Again he slipped below the sidewalk. He shook dice with a Jew girl at the cigar counter. He lost and paid double for the smoke. Then, sitting at a table, he ordered a seidel of beer, as the white-robed female orchestra struck up on their dais under artificial palms.

He was tired, and soon the rhythmic fiddling of the sateen ladies caressed his ears as if they were filled with cotton-wool. Out the window, the blazing sign of the place, which he had not noticed before, slowly branded itself upon his sleepy eyes, above a large chugging motor. He read the name that he had heard from Madge, of where she and Lena were to carouse: "Berlin Café." The smoky haze reeked of the salamander, sickened him, and he flushed to the roots of his lustrous hair.

The clock over the bar pointed at twelve minutes to midnight. Gail paid his bill, and hurried out into the cloudy night with a recreant dulness in his heart.

VI

Minker's windows defied the darkness of Pike Street with a greenish glare of mantle gas and porcelain tiles. But inside, the stony sheen of the long tables filled an empty expanse. A couple of girls without aprons dozed on a bench in the rear. A late, ominous silence haunted the place, soothed by the sleepy hiss of steam from the big nickel coffee-heater. Gail felt that business had been suspended, awaiting his return. And then a door in one of the long walls opened. A lank, albino young man with close-cropped hair jerked out,

and approached as if Gail had been expected. He had bad teeth.

"You the gentleman who inquired for Miss Thain this afternoon?" he asked. His pinkish face flushed, and he turned his head away. "Well, we had a 'phone message from down there early tonight — perhaps you've heard?" he hesitated. Gail stared blankly past him. "It was the proprietor called up, but we didn't know where you'd gone —" the voice broke off, hushed.

"What place?" asked Gail, huskily. "Proprietor of what?"

All the fibres in his body tightened; his heart drummed against his ribs. The night manager kept his head bowed, reticently.

"Proprietor of the hotel where she lived, I guess," he said. "Asked us if we knew whether she had any friends."

"What hotel?" Gail heard his own voice, as if a third person were speaking.

"Someone was sick, and the city doctor had been there."

"No — no! No — no!"

The albino fumbled in the breast pocket of his white jacket. "I got the number of the room written here for you," he said gently, holding out a slip of paper. "The New England."

"Was it — there — I saw them?" wavered Gail. "I don't remember. . . . No — no! . . ."

He felt his fingers, cold and hard as steel, close on the scrawl. The bright convexity of the coffee tank cast his face back at him, distorted and clayey. He crumpled the paper and flung it on the floor.

Then reason, or what seemed like reason, broke out

in him, clearly, hatefully. His mind iterated, like a child repeating the multiplication table: The bay horse times the neat buggy, made the trembling old man in spectacles. The albino voiced some sort of silly hope or pity for him, and the next moment Gail found himself groping between the sepulchral blueness of the grid-dle-cake burners in the street windows; and he was sitting in an open trolley with the night wind and a slight drizzle blowing in upon him coldly.

No — he could not be too late. That would be too malign, even for him. They were only sicker, and the lodging people, as Martha had written, were kind. Anger for the delay seized Gail; his recent aspiring, delectable hours crumbled into dross. He grew aware of the electric diadem on the dome of the city hall up the hill to the left, floating past the street openings, cut off now and then by a tall building. Surely in some other city long ago, instead of tonight, he had seen it glow out. Then it was gone; he seemed to hear the click of a switch extinguishing it. Now he was walking through dark and empty streets. An arc light spun a moist shaft of radiance down the limitless, silent asphalt. Again he was below the dead-line. A queer flavour of the vanished crowds persisted in the spots of moisture where they had spat. He spelt out the letters of the New England's illuminated sign, and drew himself up the steep stair above the hardware store.

The old man's mop of iron-grey hair was bent over a dog-eared register, in which he was scrawling by the light of a single candle, peering over the bulging lenses of his spectacles. He sat in a cramped cell with one window which gave onto the entry. He looked up through this, to squint suspiciously at Gail over the steel rims on his nose.

"Hello?" he said timidly, dropping his pen. "You after my report? I'm making it."

As in a feverish dream, Gail scarcely heard him. Unconscious of the flow of his words, Gail questioned, entreated the fellow.

His watery, flint-grey eyes softened. His lips twitched. He coughed asthmatically.

"Yes, I guess that's them," he conceded. "I expected someone like you after the examiner. I'd rung up Minker's. You the husband *and* father?"

"Yes. . . . He's mine." Gail's voice swelled with pride and triumph.

"But the mother wa'n't your wife though?" he asked shrewdly, tilting his straw hat to one side. "You can't tell me she was married. She hadn't no wedding ring."

Gail could not answer. Iron bands pressed across his bosom. He stood there, shaking, his face aflame.

"Well, she was no bad woman. She never give us any trouble," the man maundered on. "Not the kind the po-lice is running out of the best hotels. She slaved her arms down to the bone after quitting Minker's, getting up at daylight to scrub out saloons. She was going to leave the kid with my old woman. We'd sort of got attached to him."

Gail clutched the little window sill.

"Young man, you ought to ha' done your best by her," he wheezed on, with a sudden sternness. "Still, folks like me can't afford a judgment."

"Choke it off —" Gail gasped.

Two hot wires were burning under his eyes. He did not know that they were tears until they dropped beside the register. The old man looked at him critically a moment, and then, reaching into a tin letter-box, pro-

duced a blue bandanna, and shoved it toward Gail. He did not notice it.

"Her rent's all paid up to the first of the month," said the fellow, reassuringly.

"How is he — better? For God's sake tell me!" cried Gail, at last subduing the heart-sapping conflict of his despair and faith.

"Well, now he ain't —" began the old man, soothingly, choosing his words, "he wa'n't worse for long. And didn't suffer much that we could see up to this afternoon."

"Suffer —? " blazed Gail.

"Hey?" He turned his head away. Then, as if moved by a saving idea, he said, urgently, "You want to go up to the room, mightn't you?"

"Go. . . . Do I? . . . Good God! . . . , Come on!"

"You can spend the night there, if you want to risk it." He took the tin candlestick, emerged from the rear of his coop. "And I won't charge you nothing," he added, "if you'll settle a small bill first."

He led the way down the murky corridor. They climbed one sagging back stairway after another. The man paused now and then to warn laconically about turns and steps. Gail stumbled on behind, speechless, seizing at the walls to keep his balance. A stinging, acrid odour met his nostrils, but meant nothing to him.

High up under the roof, the old man paused before a door covered with blistered brown paint. He raised the candle. It flared against the figure 4 on a panel, which he quickly pushed open — into darkness.

"In here," he said, walking across the room. A window opened close on the sharp pitch of a roof, dimly visible in the starlight. The candle shrank to a blue point. Placed on the table, it shone again.

Gail stared into the room, rooted to the threshold. A tremulous acid wave was rising through all his limbs, piercing his diaphragm. Far off, in the back of his head, as if a blow had struck it, arose a singing, like a field of croaking frogs.

"It's empty," he stammered, hoarsely. "You don't mean —?" The words were in falsetto.

"They had to clean out everything tonight to fumigate. But I put on clean bedding, in case the house was crowded." The voice wavered remote in the gloom. "They only had the stuff on her back, and what little truck belonged to the youngster. We had to burn 'em all."

Gail felt his knees collapsing. But he had no sense of sorrow, felt no stab of pain. Tears were as far from his eyes as laughter. He was mad, with a destructive fury, as if he had seen his boy killed before him; but powerless to stir the smallest muscle.

The man approached him, leaving the candle on the table. As he crossed the door-sill, passing out into the hall again, he cringed; but it was not until Gail's own arms fell weakly before him, that he knew how he had raised his hands with rigid fingers as though to grip the fellow by the throat.

"Lemme go. You don't act like no sane father," panted he. "I be'n leery of you all along. So about that bill I mentioned —"

"Bill?" echoed Gail.

"Yes, bill. If you sleep here tonight, you got to let me have a sum on account. The old lady knows jest what it cost, but she's tired out nursing them, and in bed. I'll give you a receipt, if you'll come downstairs." He spoke insistently from their direction. "I think

the charge was ten dollars, but it was the cheapest one we could contract for to accommodate them both."

"The doctor —?"

"No. The coffin to lay them out in, when they're done at the morgue. It come about three hours ago."

Gail ripped out a ten dollar bill. It crackled as if it were on fire. He felt a callous hand close on it.

"What did they die of?" moaned Gail.

"Diphtheria," came the voice, mingling with the clump of descending footsteps. "What did you think so sudden, that they'd have to burn brimstone fer? . . . And you look out for that candle."

With a quick wave of muscular strength Gail plunged into the room and hurled the door closed. Its slam shook the whole house. In the return of his senses, a running fire had burst out in his brain. As from a great distance, he sighted the Gail Thain of glorious resolutions and a new life; of his yearning to merge, to suffer, and to dream with the surging humanity of the City of Dreams; saw himself a shadowy creature with his head bowed before a vast pageant of painted cardboard and tarnished gilt. He beheld the trail of his bodily immortality, which that noon had reached endlessly into the future, swept by a conflagration, black and charred.

He stared with dry eyes and parched, open lips, dizzily about the mean room. Not a token, not a sign or vestige of them. There were only the clammy sheets on the iron bedstead, the bare walls grey with mildewed whitewash, the broken table covered with a towel, the little distorting mirror, the basin and its thin sliver of mottled soap, the faint, keen, sickening odour of the sulphur.

He sank upon the bed. He buried his head in his hands. His body relaxed and a chill swept him. He relinquished the fight to hold in his soul. He burst into hot tears of anguish.

He wallowed down into the bed. That poor spark of all that should be deathless — his boy — had suffered there. *He!* Had he not left the faintest aroma, the thinnest taste? A fierce animal craving seized Gail to draw back within himself, through his pores, into his blood vessels, that escaped and vanished shadow of his own existence. . . .

CHAPTER IV

RORY O' THE HEAD

I

A SILVERISH light filmed the dirty window. Gail saw a chimney with its bricks loose. The sun was shining outside, and rotted shingles hung askew on the steep slant of the roof.

He had fought off the sleep which he had lapsed into; now he was plunged back to the agony he dreaded. And yet he had slept, from exhaustion, he told himself. The raw daylight tore open the old suffering. He tried to stifle it by conjuring the dream through which the shingles and warped chimney had dawned.

He had been alone on an island in a grey-green, translucent ocean, cold and veiled in mists. Wet spruces mounted toward the snowfields of abrupt mountains behind. But he had been neither lonely there, nor sick at heart. He had watched the swell suck and sway the kelp upon gaunt rocks. He had felt that he was free.

Gail swung his body upright upon the bed. He ached with drowsiness, but not until now, he was sure, had he been fully awake. The fierce, full pain of his loss assailed him. He quailed; yet bore it. Somehow, guiltily, could it be dulling his soul?

He stole out of the room, down the twisting stairway. He cowered a moment in the corridor before passing the little office window, shrinking from sight of the spectacled ghoul who had thought him crazy. Then, summoning courage, he strode past with head erect.

The glass was lowered, but he discerned behind it a large, red-faced woman — she that had cared for the boy and bought the coffin, likely — her forehead also mantled with grey hair in untidy wisps. But he had no impulse to speak with or thank her. He had paid cash for her last kindness. He loathed the very walls about him.

Death to Gail, as to so many whom life has failed, was but resignation, relief, a material nothing. He had no heart to see his boy's or Martha's body. Even the thought of them under the unctuous palms and draperies of an undertaker's, or in a morgue, revolted him. Always in the face of defeat, he knew that Martha would haunt his dreams; but in his sentiment could be no morbidness. Only the living and their thirsts mattered now for him. What else could avail anyone who faced the rigour and the ventures of the Youngest World?

He emerged on the familiar street, in the early morning stir of the multitude. He washed in the lavatory of a saloon on the corner, and ate chopped beef and onions at the nearest coffee stand.

But from all the wreck, his aspiration to study the goals and voids-in-heart of his fellow-men survived. He would build his future upon doing this. It was to be a faith, the compensation for his chagrin and anguish. And its guiding force was that power in Nature, ever making toward the good, which the throngs here below the dead-line had revealed. A nobleness and glorious responsibility lay in the mere state of being alive. Gail felt that he had sunk into the darkest pit beneath the house of life, and that henceforward his struggle must be upward.

He was free! He was without the smallest tie in the world of blood or love. Without his boy, no reason re-

mained for returning to Lena. She had consented to his quitting her for a time, surmised that it would be for good. She had been right, thanks to the unspeakable Madge. He was indifferent whether she went to her mother in Sacramento, or with Madge. He had broken forever with his blasted past.

Freedom! It was a glowing spark, fed by circumstance, dimmed by despair, yet fanned, even by death, into a mounting flame.

He was ready to follow the slightest impulse. In his detachment from any care, he had even a physical sense of lightness.

II

A dray piled high with crates of pale green cabbages turned down a street leading to the water-front. At this season of the spring rush northward, such stuff was bound, Gail knew, for Alaska, starving for green food. Aimlessly he followed the cart, across the maze of railway tracks, among freight cars, and came out on the docks by the cool gloss of the harbour. A jam of loaded trucks, and the fitful rattling of winches, marked the black wooden hull, the greasy funnel and slovenly upper body of a steamship — *Seward*, he read on her stern — squatted in the slip beside a big red wharf-house.

He sat on the string-piece of the empty pier next the vessel, and, hanging his feet over the water, watched a box-stall jerked up into midair by the coughing hoist. He heard the thudding hoofs of each terrified horse inside it, lowered over the ship's forward hatch. Another winch aft began to dangle steel rails on high. They banged together with reverberations as of gigantic tuning forks. Gazing at the unseaworthy hulk with her

sections of unpainted rail and life-boat davits missing, Gail wondered in what honest port she had been condemned, only to be floated to Seattle, bought by the mushroom company that poured cement over her leaky plates, patched her rusty boilers, bribed the local inspectors, and launched her in the golden northern trade.

Then in the basin between him and the *Seward*, a new sound arose. Steam began to bubble from a little house on a raft, where a pile-driver undertook to whack a new trunk of fir, replacing one gnawed by teredoes in the wharf he sat on. Close by, a stumpy, vigorous man was hauling on a wire cable. He threw it around a stanchion, and once having it fast, grunted, all but tumbling backward upon Gail.

"Bless ye, man, I never seen ye!" he exclaimed, regaining his balance and mopping his wide brow with a grimy bandanna.

His hair grew thin and frizzled on a round, bullet head. He was not young, but his lined face did not look old, although he had the bowed aspect of a man whose lifetime had been weighted and consumed with bodily labour. As he lingered in his oily brown overalls, a freshness in the curve of his mouth, in the gleam of his clear, pale eyes, gave to his panting dejection an air of strength and valour dissipated by some defect of will.

He contemplated Gail with a directness bound to break into speech.

"As a labouring man, I ask ye," he broke out earnestly, in a slight brogue. "What work can I get less ha'sh than this? It's just a-wearing of me out. I be'n at the likes of it thirty years, only a-helping others, doing the dog's part of each job, in ev'ry state acrost

this continent, since I landed in Halifax. What's to be the end of it? I'm no farther on, no better off, than whin I begun. What am I a-living for, son?"

Gail was stirred by the vehemence with which the man confronted his own problems. But he had never reckoned upon having to give counsel. He had thought himself the party to question thus. A diffidence beset him. He could not reply, and the Irishman went on, tremulously:

"I come to the Coast for the better wages and living it offered. And I find it's harder for a man to shift here. The Unions is ha'sher. Yer sized up and kicked aside quicker. The sup'rintindints eye yer worth crooler. Ye got to be younger, smarter, an' take bigger gambles." His eyes drooped. "And this country all makes a man more res'less."

"What sort of work—?" floundered Gail, self-absorbed.

"All I ask is bread, bread, sir!" He threw out his arms. "And a qui't place to rest my bones in whin I'm old."

Gail murmured something about an Indian reservation being lately thrown open to settlement; about taking up a homestead.

The fellow laughed mockingly. "'Tis a lie whin they say any free lands is left. I've scoured all this western country, and if the' was, what show 'ud I have? Hundreds in line, for days and nights, ahead of me at the land office, and it fixed by the capitalists to get them the rich sections and us chunks of lavey desert. That's frontier living nowadays. That's consarvation for the public. All this new country's owned by them big guns. An' our job is to sweat out our souls with pick or plough, shapin' it for comforts for hawgs to

wallow in." He jabbed a finger at the steam-flecked skyscrapers of the city. "Have ye never seen their women-folks ridin' straddle-legged, shootin' around in autymobiles, their sons and husbands drunk and gamblin'?"

Gail nodded, feelingly; while in the pause the attesting roar of Seattle, living so avidly in the vainglorious present, swept across her swarming markets and grimy yards. At least, the man epitomised his sympathy of the past evening for the feverish street crowds. Young as was the complex frontier, its fruit was rank, exotic, the while the roots of its life and opulence decayed.

"And I ain't no socialist, ayther," added the other. "I'm too honest with meself. Only give me the chanst to steal them stock operators and tide-land dealers has, and I'd take more than thim, and make a cleaner get-away."

"Nor I," agreed Gail, vaguely; for as he tried to weigh the fellow's complaint, his eyes had again fallen on the *Seward*.

"How about Alaska," he asked, "for a new country?"

"Ah, there's the land, boy!" The seamed face brightened. "There y'are a-speaking. Alasky ain't all gobbled up yet by them thrusts, but will be. Meself, I was takin' an outfit to St. Michael's on the rush last year. But the blackguard I was grubstaked by welched on me. I got here too late. It's always too late with me." He shook his head, dolefully. "There — I've told ye what I am," he ended. "And it's been the curse o' me. I'm too much a wand'ring man. I've always wanted to see and know the things that ain't property-like, and money couldn't buy — the hearty, shiftin' things in the men along the trails."

Gail started. "What — things?" he gaped, divinely.

"Oh — nothing I c'd tell ye, or ye understand." A dreamy hardness entered his voice. "But I've ever thought that jest to move aroun' and see the changin' worrld, and hear men talk of their vict'hries and dissypintments, is enough to get outen life. 'Tis so warm and true, so powerful and hejous at times, it seems like your thinkin' of it niver can die."

An intangible glow bathed and transformed his presence. His lips twitched, and he ran a hand backward through his scant hair, like one facing an expectation.

What sort of a thirst was this, thought Gail — to wander for its own sake? . . . Beside the goal of fatherhood! . . .

"Still — some day *you've* got to die," said Gail, bewildered, his eyes once more resting on the scarred steamer. "So what's the use, without some brain sprung from you, continuing. . . ."

"*Have* ye?" retorted the Irishman, in spirited doubt. "I know countrymen o' mine that says how the dreams and images of things lives on forever by theirselves. . . . But going my way has kind of weakened me," he relaxed. "And now I'm gettin' old."

Yet the man kept looking at him, with a sort of secretive triumph out of the corners of his eyes. Only the more perplexed, Gail asked himself: Were the multitudes' infinite aims less simple than he had conceived? Was the outpouring of his heart to them last night in the vortex of the City of Dreams but the vain, extravagant flower of his momentary exaltation? Perhaps the wisdom that he wanted from mankind was not to be compassed in a few years' seeking, but must embrace the lessons and the meanings of a lifetime.

"I'm going to Alaska," blurted Gail. "That's where I'm bound!"

"Takin' a chanst in that boneyard hulk yonder? It 'ud be safer to resk the plains with crazy Sioux in the old-time prairie schooners, than on one o' them Alasky liners."

Gail's hand had wandered to his pocket, and touched the remaining ten dollar bill. That would not pay his fare to the North. He shook his head, piqued by the conceit of his sudden whim.

"And ye oughtn't to go there," continued the Irishman. "To a land like Alasky, without yer heart's in the trip, and ye've long dreamed on it."

"Heart!" echoed Gail, impulsively. "I guess mine is dead."

The fellow took an estimating step backward; then, returning, he proffered gently:

"A turr'ble thing the heart is, ain't it, sir? Seems like she must be in everything we do, not to fail." He coughed with a deliberate unction; and averted though Gail's eyes and senses were, he was aware that the man had altered his mood.

"But the heart, eh —?" repeated he. "The heart can't feed us. You must 'a' been in love or married."

"I was — both," Gail answered, yet blind to the other's design. "But they weren't the same. If you've never been in love, nor all at once a father —" his voice caught.

"I? The likes o' me?" chuckled the Irishman. "I've fed enough on sorrows, but they've never had the taste o' solid grub."

Gail felt a hand on his shoulder. He wrenched himself away with a quick shame, reaction to his confession;

and then, instantly, suspicion. So: the man's easy sympathy, his guise as wanderer and dreamer, was but the invidious grease on an itching palm. Fooled, at the outset of his search among men! But Gail subdued a flare of his old callousness, to find himself without the least resentment or cynical disgust; and the Irishman's next words, in his first strain, made Gail sure that he did the fellow an injustice.

III

"Man, then, I guess we're both doomed to the same limbo," he declared. "To keep a-goin', and a-workin', and a-wanderin', and a-learnin'. Jest holdin' the breath in our mouths, and the fog o' death outen our throats." He stopped short, to add gravely, as if powerfully moved by the thought, "Like Rory o' the Head. Yes, like oul Rory."

"Who was he?" invited Gail, eagerly. "An Irish hero out of some myth?"

The other stiffened and scrutinised him. "Ye don't know o' *him*? Well, well! Then I guess ye ain't no Irishman," he added with an astonished regret, as if all his confidences had been based on such an assumption; and turning his back, he started walking off toward the pile-driver.

"Hi! Come back!" called Gail, with twinkling eyes. He fumbled in his pocket, and as the wastrel, obeying, neared him, Gail thrust the ten dollar bill into his horny hand. He accepted it, gravely, silent, his head bowed, and too overcome to mumble more than a perfunctory thanks, the while he folded the note into a minute oblong. Then, escaping again up the pier, he called back, "And if y'are sailing in that floating coffin, why ain't ye packed yer duffle and stuff aboard

her now?"—and climbed down a little ladder to his raft.

"Rory o' the Head," muttered Gail, grasping from the very sound of the name, in the intensity and spirit of his friend, however insincere, what sort of a phantom, of a symbol for his own future, Rory might be.

And often in the months to come, thought of that name would vividly recall this moment and its scene: The heat shimmering over the city in this brief season of dust and sunlight; the growl of steam-shovels eating into her steep hills; the tarry coal-smoke poised in thin scarf-like layers over the chill greyness of the Sound; the pile-driver pausing, rattling, thudding; striking dock-hands with felt hats over their faces lying asleep in the sun; the patter of hammers aboard the loading *Seward*, building corrals for steers and sheep to feed the mysterious North. And through the haze yonder, snow in the fantastic crests of the Olympic peaks, like some malleable white metal; behind which—the hidden horizon, the ocean, and unimaginably far, ever the magic North.

Go to Alaska. Why not? But again the jingle in his pocket, just sixty-three cents, brought a bleary smile to Gail's face. Still, he might find work aboard the steamer, as a deck-hand or waiter. He had never seen the ocean. All at once his temerity took on the aspect of a providence. He was filled with an immense loathing for the city. To-day the very might of its destiny oppressed him. It was the City of Dreams, but its dream was vain. Its wealth was satanic; its labour slavery. Rising giantess that Seattle was, her young sinews were wasting, in the decimation of forests, salmon—sons. She bought brawn and youth like

so much cattle, herded it upon the unseaworthy ark over there. She filled strong heads and hearts with the lure of the golden *tundra*, and sold them adulterated flour, rotten sledge harness. The old shoulder-to-shoulder spirit of pioneering was dead. His wandering friend had been right. There were masters and slaves where all had once been fighters. The bond of a manhood defence against wolf and Indian was dead. Discovery had lost its thrill. A grubstake was only a hand-out on the bread-line of adventure.

Gail could not remember having ever before so felt the injustice of existence toward anyone but himself. And his suffering had wrought the change! Yesterday he had exalted the multitude in vague fantasies upon the backs of his eyelids; to-day they opened against the grinding kaleidoscope of life.

Yet fresh hordes kept coming westward, to toil and spend. The instinct to subdue and win from heartless Nature was unquenchable, if heroic no more. And if the City of Dreams was a fool's paradise, must there not be a brave and honest realm beyond, a world yet younger? For all men whom Seattle cheated could not be her pawns, pledged to stake placers under powers of attorney, to lay rails upon glaciers in order to sell stock. Surely argonauts still left for Alaska with their own dreams and grubstakes. Some resistless, self-concealing, unfathomable spell lurked in the North. Its glamour did not tarnish in the breath of tragedy, or failure, or deceit. Simple, savage, it might bare the wisdom in men's hearts, or be the kingdom of primordial thirsts.

Gail thrilled to the ache of a sudden yearning. Why, that morning he had been in Alaska in his dream!

IV

A whistle rasped through the sunlight. The pile-driver, the winches, the harsh voices of deck-hands died away. Noon. And then a hoarse tremolo from the funnel across the basin warned that the *Seward* was sailing.

Gail was running up the dock. He dodged through the clutter of trucks, into the red wharf-house. Bearded men in long miners' boots, lean, shaven faces with fargazing eyes, backs bowed under dunnage bags, streamed on with him. All around against the walls were piled bags of flour, rolls of tar roofing, crates of hardware, onions, condensed milk. And over each heap stencilled signs bore remote, alluring names: Iliuliuk, Tyonek, Androfski, Chigmit. At the foot of the ship's gangway, a pinched-face little man in a uniform was talking to two flashy women, who laughed with an exaggerated shrillness. He wore a soiled and collarless boiled shirt, and "steward" was lettered on his cap.

Gail spoke, and drew him aside. The steward listened impatiently, chewing a tooth-pick.

"Waiter? You mean you want to be a flunky," he snapped, spitting. "D'you belong to the Union?"

Gail hesitated that he did not.

"Then I can't take you. The Union holds us up on this coast to employ all their bums and dope-fiends. Two of my force are up on Railroad Avenue drunk now." But he seemed to thaw with the confidence. "You got an outfit? Must have a white jacket. And mind, I'm only taking a chance on your decent looks," he reversed himself, aggressively. "I guess I can fit you out. So hustle now!"

Not to give him time to change his mind, Gail pushed away to the deck, through the crowd filing ashore. He walked aft to the rudder-post, and sat on a round life-buoy by a pile of potato sacks. Whole dripping sides of beef and scalded hogs dangled from hooks overhead. Beside him, a tall gaunt youth with leathery cheeks specked by moles, and in a white jacket, stood rolling wheat-paper cigarettes, but throwing each away after a few puffs. He kept muttering to himself, glancing at Gail with a sort of resentful curiosity. And then the voices calling good-byes all around receded far away within Gail's ears.

"Shake a leg, old girl!" exclaimed the pale youth.

Gail peered toward the gangway. Up it was hurrying the lithe figure of a young woman, her head bent forward at a striking, resolute angle. She wore a tight brown, tailored jacket with a martin-skin fastened at her throat by a nickel chain, a toque hat with a flowing blue veil, which was lifted.

Instantly Gail was on his feet; for on reaching the deck she had stopped abruptly, and was gazing toward him. Her eyes penetrated him, and as he returned the look, he saw that they were sharp and yellow, gleaming with a peculiar, deliberate brightness.

A warmth, as of some liquid, invaded unwelcomely the region of his heart. And then, with a toss of her fine head, as if he had been mistaken for a friend, the girl vanished into the chattering crowd along the rail. But more than an image of her remained fixed in Gail; a presence, also, a tangibility. She reminded him of something — some animal — ah! — a cougar, the mountain lion; yet she had none of its cat-like furtiveness. She suggested, though at once he downed the thought, Martha; what Martha might have become

if stimulated by comforts and affection; and yet more restless, alert, stronger and higher-strung.

Gail was certain that she had caught his eye, had thrilled quickly to his reading of her. An hour ago, he would have taken oath that no woman could have so aroused him. But that tawny fire in her eyes, piercing him so wisely! It mingled alike solicitude, self-confidence, and then repudiation. . . . She was to be aboard this ramshackle hulk with him, she a passenger, he a waiter. More than his male, protective instinct boldly awoke, but only that an ironic misdoubt should blur the dream. . . .

What might not be her quest in the North? Women of all sorts, especially from Occidental Avenue, went to Alaska. She had avowedly impressed herself upon him. A professional wife? And there was the pallid flunky's taunt. . . .

V

The short blares sounded for shoving off. The *Seward's* stern was swinging into the stream. A thick cable flopped off into the water. A quickening intimacy loosed itself between the throngs aboard and ashore; yet few Christian names echoed in the farewells. An open-mouthed tension pervaded, an air of impersonal hope and apprehension for destinies in a portentous land. An indistinct chorus was cast from dock to ship, from ship to receding dock, as of warnings, confidences, which men and women had not the courage to voice before this twinge of severance. Gail's pulses quickened, deepened, in response to all this variety and throb.

A heavily-built, sleek man in a large plaid cap, with ivory charms and a bulky watch-chain across his

stomach, elbowed a way to the side. He hurled a silver dollar to a shy, tired little woman dressed in black and a bonnet trimmed with cherries. "That's for luck, mother," he shouted, boyishly. "I can afford it." But the dollar hit the string-piece and tumbled into the harbour.

They were off. Gail tingled all over his body with an acute sense of valour, of liberation, almost of happiness. Years seemed to have passed since he had followed those crates of cabbages. Then he looked inboard, and his gaze fell upon the line of high-booted, set-eyed men pressed to the rail, who had neither stirred nor spoken during all the parting.

CHAPTER V

BOB SNOWDEN

I

"HERE, sniff up," said a voice from the darkness in the under bunk. "One with me before we go above. A man needs the brace to get away with all the hot air you hear in that smoking-room."

A thin hand, white and almost womanly, was thrust upon Gail's grimy blanket from below. It grasped a tiny round box, filled with a glistening powder, and was the hand of the mole-marked flunky of Gail's first moments aboard the *Seward*. His name was Rex Murkid, and the two were quartered in a blind cell off the forward freight hold, in an atmosphere of bilge water and musty flour.

Rex, aged nineteen, had served two years for theft in an Oregon reform school, which accounted for his habit of "blowing his burners" with cocaine. The boy had a dramatic ambition to save a woman's life some day in a shipwreck, or otherwise. This was as far as Gail could read his only friend on board. Retreating to their bunks each evening, after washing dishes in the steamy, stale-food odours of the pantry, and as Gail smoked, Rex exalted himself with the drug. Then he lapsed from his grudge-bearing outlook upon life, and would drift into the inconclusive talk of youth in the toils of such a vice, telling of his boyhood as a newsagent along the Columbia River. At work with Gail in the dining-room, he stood between him and the

other flunkies, who treated Gail as if his presence were an affront to them. They all bunked aft, and were mostly oldish, wizened little men with two weeks' stubby beards, and the impatient, grumbling air of drunkards denied their whisky.

Three times a day, waiting for Rex to boom the meal-gong over the ship, these derelicts stood among the long tables laid out with chow-chow and condensed milk (watered in pitchers), shouting coarse stories to one another, vilifying the men they served, sneering at any virtue in the women. Then, with the rush of passengers below, they plunged to work with a sudden sullenness, struggled at the serving-window, shouting their orders in jargon; grabbed the portions served by the two Chinese cooks, piling them dexterously on their arms. They had an especial, racial grudge against the Chinamen, assuming that all they cooked was befouled, that they were outcast interlopers who took the bread from the mouths of white men.

They served the food with ostentation. The officers ignored their insolence when passengers complained of mistakes. Afterwards, they ate at the same tables, parrying among themselves boasts about having "interests," owning claims and "propositions" in the North. Gail gathered that such talk was only a mocking parody of what they had overheard from the passengers. A loose-lipped young giant with rat teeth named Pritchard, who had been an engineer's draughtsman until the booze enslaved him, led at this. He was the boss of them all, as they travelled back and forth between Seattle and Alaska, at generous wages inflated with tips, which were solicited by avid gallantries and accepted roughly as tribute. Their sole topics of serious talk concerned these tips, and the details of their

souses in port at the end of each run. They told in whispers of narrow escapes, when they had returned aboard drunk, from being fired by the abrupt steward, whose boisterous manner, empty though it was, easily cowed such men as they. Since he searched their dunnage for whisky before going to sea, they would mention the amounts they could swallow with reminiscent unction and a dry-lipped anticipation.

Gail waited on the end of the middle table, where Mitchell, the stout purser, ate. There a slim Danish nurse with a cowlicky bang, bound for the Valdez hospital, sat next the rotund man who had thrown the dollar overboard — a railroad "magnate" named Kilgour. Opposite them were a fresh-faced young butcher from Butte, going North on an oil-well deal into which he had sunk his savings, and a depressed, untidy woman with two little girls dressed in red flannel, who was the wife of a foreman in a gold quartz mine on the Kenai Peninsula.

Although this was the fourth day out, Gail had not once caught sight of the girl in the blue veil. Pritchard took food to her room at irregular hours, and while he insinuated evil in all the other women he served, he never referred to her except as his "sea-sick dame." This filled Gail with a vague jealousy, stimulated his concern for her, and caused Rex's slur on seeing her come aboard to rankle in him ever more deeply.

II

Gail received the little box from the youth's hand. Taking a pinch of the powder, he leaned forward and scattered it between his mattress and the bulkhead. Then he passed him back the drug, saying, "I'm going easy this time. That last dose was pretty stiff

for a man not used to it." He considered that by this deceit he avoided wounding Rex's generosity. Admonition for the habit never occurred to him.

"Get the hang. You will soon enough," said Rex. "Ah! . . ." The syllable of ecstasy mingled with the sound of his nose snuffing the powder. "Come on," he cried lightly, springing from the bunk; and Gail followed, groping through the dank, freight-cluttered gloom, to the dining-room door. "That hound Mitchell can't spot us to-night," said the boy, as they gained the sloppy deck. "He's getting his claws trimmed by that rounder from Spokane, up in her room." The purser barred flunkies from the smoking-room, but they defied his rule by sneaking into its stuffy warmth aft of the Social Hall, and pretending to sleep on one of the hard settees. Rex always looked upon this as a stirring episode.

A raw blast from the veiled, stupendous alps of the St. Elias range across the Fairweather Grounds kept the old *Seward* pitching mercilessly in the icy fog and drizzle of the North Pacific, racking her loose seams, her under-powered machinery groaning. Gail clutched along the rail, and reaching the Social Hall windows, peered inside, as he always did in passing them. And now he caught his breath. This time she was there! She sat in a loose, plum-coloured dress at a card-table in the corner by the piano, playing patience. The Danish nurse lolled beside her, holding a paper novel but watching the game.

Gail shrank from the pane, but he could not stop gazing at her, studying her. The same blue veil swathed her bold forehead bent over the cards. He could catch the gleam in her tawny eyes, acute, adventurous, contrasting with the lax and petulant gaze

of the nurse. Her oval features seemed more pallid, her nose and chin sharper. But all resemblance to Martha had vanished. Yet no sooner had it relieved him to decide that, than he was disturbed by how his inner image of Martha dimmed in her presence.

"Eyes out-board, there. Ain't you coming?" shouted Rex, his voice smothered by the storm.

But she had quickly swept up her cards, and now arose, shuffling them. A man was approaching her. He held a small bottle in his right hand, and walked with an easy, athletic swing. Gail recognised him as the "dude" (that was the pantry's epithet) with the straw-coloured, curly hair and very dark blue eyes, who sat at the Norwegian skipper's right at meals and guffawed at his elaborate, childish humour; who usually smoked a briar pipe, but never came into the smoking-room. Pritchard had mentioned his business in Alaska, but for the moment Gail could not recall it.

The man began to talk. The muscles of his clean, angular jaw tightened and quivered. He stood there in baggy corduroy knickerbockers, his knees sagging slightly, and flushed with a smile. At length the woman, as if ending a jocose protest, grasped the phial from his outstretched arm, burst into laughter. It penetrated the window, ringing and high-pitched, but also hearty, wholesome. She began to speak, and decisively.

Gail could no longer contain himself. What were they two saying? He stole to the saloon door, pushed it open. The man was addressing her; and at the word which Gail caught on the out-pouring, humid draught, he let the door bang to, chilled instinctively.

"Lamar. . . ." It was that.

Where, ages gone, had he heard the name? Ah—

he remembered. In his mountain cabin, from Madge Arnold. One of her Wilbur's interests was with Lamar, the copper king up North.

Back at the window, the man had gone. The nurse was staring open-mouthed at the blue veil, while its wearer, still gaily laughing, tucked the bottle into her shirt-waist. Yet Gail felt no resentment, but only emulation, of the light-haired fellow's acquaintance with her, although he now recalled Pritchard's remark about him. Once, in a moment of the shameful honesty which was the key to that flunky's hold over his mates, he had observed: "A man like him helps out this country no more than we do." But she, for whom now he self-confessed an honest and exalted love — and Lamar, who typified the malignant forces corrupting the Youngest World: What were their ties?

Ploughing aft, Gail wrenched open the smoking-room door against the wind. It banged behind, and a pitch hurled him into his usual corner. He discerned through the fetid tobacco smoke the stout young butcher buried in an all-story magazine, the Siwash boy returning to his tribe from Carlisle with a head full of algebra but unable to set a marten trap, and all the bearded, booted men whom the *Seward's* send-off had not moved. They were not prospectors at all, but had contracted to wield pick-axes along Kilgour's railroad for the summer. Except for the four others who played "solo" all day, it was a grizzled, dejected company, that smoked rank cigars and fostered friendships by telling scathing anecdotes concerning all men and forces who blocked the opulence each yearned for. Indeed, but one sure-enough argonaut appeared to be on board, the most reticent of the solo players, named Marks, an inky-haired being in a tan leather jacket, who if drawn into

any discussion, slowly donned his gold-rimmed glasses and argued with a studious, logical, wearisome precision.

At the moment, a hollow-eyed youth with deeply furrowed cheeks, in a black shirt was holding forth violently. "Last year a man coming to Eyak can't get no work at all. Nor to Valdez, even cutting wood. Nothing more than five dollars a day, and what's that? It costs you three at a hotel. You ain't no d——n better off than outside, by hell!" He assumed it a cause for withering anger, an insult to his manhood, that he was denied the wages he demanded. He seemed ready to square off and smash with his fists anyone who should even dispute him.

The ambition of the smoking-room was to keep wages at their top pitch, regardless of the amount of labour returned. The working-man exalted himself, yet there ran an under-current of assumption that toil was of itself degrading, as vindictive stories of oppression by employers signified. They were reviled with oaths for wasting money in "fool" propositions, by men who boasted of revenging themselves by chucking away their grub and tools along trails in a starving land. Such reminiscences led to disputes regarding the personal histories of "operators"—names well-known to them all; and arguments waxed warm with an acid eloquence. Yet few of them told of encounters with fist or gun, of primitive vengeance; of the passions involving manhood and honour that filled the dramatic pages of romances that Gail had read about Alaska; or of self-sacrifice in hours of freezing and starvation, such as newspapers related. Most of their stories led with an inhuman terseness to some sardonic climax, keyed upon the treachery of one's employer or fellow-

worker, or his failure and defeat in being "stumped by the country."

But if Kilgour entered the smoking-room, all militant talk subsided. He was treated reverently, with a reserved awe, asked hesitating questions about his railway, as it were some magical undertaking from which hung the whole future of Alaska. However the slavery of capital was vilified in its absence, its imagined presence inspired an envious respect. All hands now prophesied a fabulous productivity for the land, to be secured by men standing loyally pledged to one another in its, not their own, interests. But Kilgour would respond with no more than far-away glances, in indefinite promises; and Gail would wonder if men as masses were not always hindered from reaching their goals by the complexity of their desires. Could it be that only he who stood by himself, armed with ruthless passions, fighting for unutterable dreams, might attain his guerdon?

Most of these men had lived for varying periods in the inexorable North, which he had dreamed of as interpreting the truth in human hearts; yet the voids in theirs were dim, discouraging to search into, unrelieved by the buoyancy or valour of any living faith.

Therefore Gail's sympathy went out only toward Rex, in his hopeless slavery, and he thought of Kilgour's mother in rusty black, standing there smiling on the dock.

III

The four who played solo, however, dominated their fellow-passengers chiefly by touching more lightly upon the burning issues of the North. Their attitude was less personal and morose, their humour compelling in

itself. In contrast with the studious Marks, the most diverting of the quartette was Virgil Rust, a hook-nosed, bald little lawyer from San Francisco, who maintained his sharp, city-bred air in a check suit and grey spats. His tales ranged from the shrewdness of free-lance ladies along the Yukon in bilking youths who had struck it rich of their pokes of dust, to the diversion of feeding Siwashes with seidlitz powders separately. Opposite him sat an old man named Waitt, with a white, flowing moustache and protruding cheek-bones, which with his ashy skin gave him a gnomish look. He was of an inquisitive, scientific turn of mind, and usually spoke in interrogations: What's that red ore of mercury? Have ye heard of this new consumption sarum? The fourth, Bill Sinrock, a tight-sinewed giant with rusty hair growing straight out from his forehead, who smoked a clay pipe in a mouth so sunken between chin and nose that he seemed to have no teeth, was Kilgour's "bridge engineer," and the acknowledged wit of the group. He showed no attainments in that science, but was undoubtedly deep in the magnate's confidence, so that his word was believed that he had been "twenty years with the Southern Pacific"—an odd genius of the frontier whom experience had elevated to heights including and beyond all theory.

On Gail's entrance, the hollow-eyed young man had interrupted lawyer Rust in one of his "Pilkie" anecdotes. "Pilkie" was the hero of endless feminine enslavements, a blond Frenchman whom Rust had defended in a townlot-jumping suit, in which three ladies (one of them Poison Emma) who wore bathing suits all that summer, had testified *ad lib.* Rust now took up Pilkie's fortunes with a thousand-dollar note, and how a Mrs. Weymouth, from Cincinnati, had duped

him in a paste diamond deal. But he had craftily left on the same steamer with her when she fled from Cape Nome. It was wrecked off Cape Sarycheff in the Unimak Pass out of Bering Sea. Pilkie reached a life-raft. Mrs. Weymouth hove alongside, on a life-preserver. . . .

"And now I'm telling you that ship of his hadn't no more cement in her bottom, nor rusted baffle-plates in her boilers, than the old *Seward* has this minute," he affirmed with a sudden seriousness, timing his words to a ripping blast of the storm outside. "We ain't making more than four knots an hour now. Let her down to two, and we'll have to heave to and wait, to save coal for them brigands that run this company."

"Our life-preservers under the bunks is nothing more than straw and saw-dust, too," piped up Waitt, plaintively, as he dealt the cards. "I cuts into one last night. Now what is understood to be the specific gravity of straw? How long'll sawdust keep a man afloat? What rake-off did the inspector get for passing them life-belts?"

"A fine day's coming when someone'll make monkeys out of the orf'cers of this company. Mebbe put 'em to honest work," growled Sinrock dryly. "Anyone's had dealing with them knows how mean they are—ugly as a basket o' monkeys stowed tail-end up. That grasping they'll eat restaurant pie and tuck away the wooden plates in their jeans."

Gail found himself dozing. The long pitches of the old hull, the dense, reeking air made him drowsy. Waitt's voice tackled radium, whose wonders he sketched with a lyceum air as if he had discovered it. Then he produced from his pocket a piece of vitreous black rock which he swore was pitchblende "from a

ledge back of Orca." But he had never had it assayed. This year he was bound North to raise bees in Cook Inlet. Sugar was up to forty cents in this new Sunitna rush, and the country was covered with honey-bearing fireweed. He had noted that while staking a mile-high cliff of pumace-stone last year. But the pumace had contained too much arsenic to make the skeleton bricks they use in sky-scrappers.

A draught of cold air whipped in upon the company. "Shut that door!" bawled a dozen voices. But all anger subsided instantly, as the face of the new-comer bloomed through the smoke above the glint of gold and ivory upon his waistcoat. It was Mr. Kilgour.

"Bang! *Bang!!*" burst out like rifle-shots, routing all feeling of homage. For a second's hair-raising silence, a dozen limp bodies stiffened, with eyes boring through the smoke.

"Shot, by G—!" cried the shrill voice of Rust, ever on edge for excitement.

"Git the hound! Hamstring the murderer!" shouted the virulent youth in the black shirt, under the common idea that Kilgour had been fired at.

A stertorous roar vibrated from the bowels of the ship. But it was the calming drawl of Rex, rising sleepily, that disappointed the stampede out into the raw daylight of nine o'clock at night—" 'Nother boiler tube blown out, I bet you."

A cloud of steam raced along the starboard beam, fizzing up raucously from the water-line. Flunkies, hairy Swede sailors, frail women from the Social Hall, elbowed against the smoking-room crew in the tension of a panic not yet sure enough of itself to have found voice. The engineer and a couple of stokers appeared at a door, with shirts open on the grime and sweat of

their chests, gasping for air. But they breathed it to explain stolidly that three tubes had burst. The captain came kiting down from the bridge in a pair of flower-embroidered carpet slippers, shouting the order to lie to for repairs. He spoke in a Norse jargon that broke the passengers' strained fear of disaster into laughter, and then a burst of intimate talk.

As the men lingered, speculating, citing the mishaps of other voyages, Gail searched the faces of the women, still tense with suspicions of lurking danger. But "Miss Lamar"—as he fancifully thought of her, though repudiating any idea of a relationship to the copper man—was not among them. The mannish rounder from Spokane, the purser's friend, in a red plush jacket, flabby-cheeked and powdered, the mine superintendent's wife sheltering her two children, and the Danish nurse, clustered around Mr. White-mead, the sky-pilot. He, a weak-eyed, elderly, thin man, with a wooden hand encased in a glove, gave prophetic lectures every evening in the Social Hall concerning one "Al Oachim." Having forecasted the end of the world for 1906, or three years hence, the women looked to him as if they expected some guarantee of safety. But he stood there trembling, with eyes flinching, his countenance like dough. Facing him for an instant, the silent Marks laughed outright.

"I b'lieve it's your 'frog,'" said Sinrock in the vernacular of solo, and nudging the prospector, led the way back to the smoking-room.

"Now wouldn't you think that such a sudden release of pressure—?" began Waitt. But finding that his audience had vanished, he followed aft.

Gail stood alone. The plunging ship creaked in every timber, as her nose swung up against the blow.

He heard a crash and rattle of dishes in the pantry. The drizzle lashed and stung him in frigid, quivering sheets. He struggled forward to see how the steers and sheep were faring in their sheds on the fo'castle deck. And alone down there in the shelter of the capstan, squatted the swarthy figure of an Italian who was to work under Sinrock, playing on a concertina some jerky tune that as Gail listened conjured a sense of sunlight — sunlight in these ever-writhing, gloomy waters!

Soon he heard a smothered voice in his ear, felt a touch on his shoulder. Turning, he met the dark-blue eyes and curly hair of the athletic young man, his tall figure muffled in a rubber poncho.

IV

"Hello. Let's talk back here," said he, lightly. "Some blow, eh? But the old tub stands it."

He spoke enjoyably, drawing Gail into the lee of the pilot-house stair. They stood outside one of the stateroom windows. Its glass was down, but the lattice blind was up.

"It's hard to get good skippers," he went on. "Only these thick-headed Sowegians'll stand the life. Americans that know the coast drink. And there's not room enough on the charts to put in all the rocks in these waters, with no light-houses at all." He stated this, not as a menace, but as a diverting problem.

"You're connected with the Company?" Gail ventured.

"Back East my father's the president of it," the other laughed. "But I pay my own fare on these trips," he added with a thrust of his narrow chin.

"Oh."

Gail was prompted to hold him responsible for indefinite injustices, yet he reasonably could not.

"Funny crowd aboard, isn't there?" he went on. "They don't understand me. Robert Snowden is my name."

"Ye-es," considered Gail, and then murmured his own name. "But I like them. My job keeps me from any real acquaintance."

He felt a freshness wafted into his mind, dissipating memory of the smoking-room's corrosive talk. The man spoke with a kind of staccato repression, earnestly, and in an accent that Gail judged to be English.

"They haven't the faintest idea why I like to climb mountains," exclaimed the other, with a winning openness.

"Climb mountains?" Gail grasped the fulness of Pritchard's remark, only to be stumped by its weight. "Some men do it as a sport, don't they? And get killed?"

The man burst into his boyish laugh. Sinewy wrinkles struck out from his thin mouth, curved upward across the quivering muscles of his hollow cheeks. Gail saw that Snowden was older than he, yet he had the snap of one younger, an exuberance as if he had never found resistance to his aims; as if they were inherently vitalising. A deep, quizzical wrinkle furrowed the delicate skin of his forehead, whether he laughed or not. His jaw, small for his shining teeth, made his head appear inadequate and fragile for his strong frame. The azure of his eyes lurked in deep sockets. He had a nervous magnetism.

"Some people call it a sport. But it's more than that—for me. I'm an enthusiast," he said, seriously. "And what I wanted to ask you was this: Are you

contracted to go back on this boat? Have you a regular job with my old man's outfit?"

"No," answered Gail, further puzzled at his confidences.

"You see, I'm bound to climb Mt. Lincoln. No one's ever been to the top. A virgin peak in this high latitude. So it's tough. And nearly 20,000 feet high. But I want another man. A packer named Jones, who knows the country, is meeting me in Valdez, but he's not enough."

The invitation was clear enough. It began to stir in Gail chaotic thoughts, of life-revealing adventure, mingled with apprehensions of danger, which held him dumb.

"That's why I spoke to you," said Snowden, shyly for the first time. "I've been watching you these days without your noticing it. You looked different from the others on board. As if you might feel — things that they wouldn't. And I thought if you weren't tied up — though I know I'm taking a risk — and you'll want to know my terms —" he hesitated. "Still, in this country I've always had to trust my judgment. A man has nothing else to go by. And it's never played me false, yet."

His straightforwardness was irresistible, inspiring. He knew his ambition in the North. Yet for what end? Gail felt himself in some way challenged.

"Why should a man want to climb mountains?" he asked, hard-headedly.

"I guess for the same reason you exert yourself at anything. To overcome a big difficulty. Maybe because people have laughed at me, and said Lincoln was unclimbable. Even my father doesn't see why. But we'll talk about all that on the trail."

He seemed ready to forgo all reserve. His assumption that they were going together raised thrilling, bewildering images before Gail.

"Do you climb for the sake of climbing?" he asked eagerly, mindful of the Irishman on the dock, and his goal of vagabondage.

"Perhaps. But for more in my case." Snowden paused, reddening. "The silent places get a power over you. You come to want them terribly, to dream of nothing else when you're not there. Things like the crackling of a glacier in the moonlight. The wind smoothing the grass in a new valley."

"Yes — yes —" breathed Gail, his mouth wide. He could see his eyes shining in the wet bulkhead against which Snowden, whose whitish lids contracted, quivering, leaned. He felt that a heart was baring itself.

"The rest I couldn't talk about now," said Snowden, quietly.

"Things like that might get a hold on me, too," Gail said. Not the envy nor bombast of the smoking-room had blighted the North's transcendent spell for him. "In spite of this crowd aboard ——"

"They don't belong to the country, to its heart," said Snowden, with pity. "But will you come with me?"

"Will I? You bet I will!" cried Gail. "And there'd be no question of wages. I'd go for the sake ——" Words failed him.

"Hel-lo!" exclaimed Snowden, laughing again. "I didn't expect that in this country, never."

"Tell me again. Why did you choose me?" urged Gail.

"I saw you had the physique, and perhaps the nerve. But the main thing is enthusiasm, and that

comes on a mountain, if a man can feel anything acutely, and is honest with himself."

"I used to play foot-ball," confessed Gail. "But I guess myself is the only person I've ever been too honest with. And I've never had enthusiasm, except for — one thing." He checked himself, feeling the blood rush to his face. "I notice things and draw conclusions too fast, but I don't always reason straight. And I've got on without being sensitive to much — except lately."

The customary self-abasement succeeded his stimulation. But never before had Gail met anyone who could so draw him out of himself.

"I can't seem to fit in in life," he complained. "I've never been able to get on, even understand folks living there around the Sound. It's one reason I'm flunking here." He felt guilty at so secretive a paraphrase of his married life. "The other is that I want to begin all over again, see everything, learn, and read-just —"

"Ye-es," said Snowden, regarding him with a thoughtful intentness; then, alertly, "All right. You're coming with me. It's a couple of days before we get in, but we ought to sight the Cape by morning. Come to my room when you get through work to-morrow. We'll have a lot to talk over. I'm next the captain's cabin." He started to walk away.

"Hold on a moment." Gail caught him by the arm. "I saw you — talking to a girl in the Social Hall."

Snowden's blue eyes widened, and he laughed, unconcerned. "I never noticed her till yesterday," he said. "She's been ill. I gave her some stuff for seasickness."

"Oh," uttered Gail, relieved at the impersonal tone.
... "So that was all."

"We'd got talking about mountain-climbing, too. She's interested, but can't understand, either," he grinned. "Seems less forward than many western women you meet now. And yet big-spirited, able to shift for herself. Only I don't like the crowd she's going to mix with in Alaska, led by a friend of my pater's. Lamar, a clever beast."

"She can't be his daughter—?" exclaimed Gail avidly, but Snowden had turned on his heel, and sprung up the ladder to the deck above.

Yet Gail leaned back against the lattice, purged of all doubts and misgivings, unclouded in his valorous anticipations of Mt. Lincoln, drawn to Bob Snowden the more warmly in some way indefinable, compelling.

An ashen light filled the darkness all around. The ship's bell overhead sounded ten o'clock, but in that latitude the pulse of day still pervaded. So uncanny a state of Nature seemed to signalise the daring fate to which he had given himself.

It had stopped raining, the wind was flagging, but the swell continued to boom and break at intervals, racking the weather side of the ship. Gail made out against the wall of fog close by a flutter of small black birds alight on the grey-green ocean. Then he felt a rubbing across the blade of one shoulder. The lattice at his back was being lowered. Swinging about, he faced a pair of glittering eyes under a blue veil, and not a foot from his own, framed in a dark square.

"Steam serenade over?" she whispered; then deliberately, leaning nearer, so that he felt her breath: "Oh, it's you. . . ."

"Yes, yes," gasped Gail. "At last!"

"The man I noticed, eh, when I nearly got left in Seattle?" she smiled, accepting, yet untouched by, his emotion.

Dissipated was all the inquisitive self-possession he had rehearsed for this chosen moment. Gail felt himself beset by those unquellable dim yearnings of his college days, when he ventured into the city at night. Thought of his heroic quest with Snowden disintegrated as if it had been a mirage.

"Must have thought you'd seen me before?" Finally he found that he could eye her, turn the table of her self-confidence. "That I was acquainted with your folks?"

"No — though I have got a brother," she instantly met his daring intimacy. "But you looked like a man that had been described to me. I was trying hard to find him once. It was quite sad. . . ."

Her voice fell, throaty, suppressed. In the ghostly twilight, Gail saw her flush. But at once she raised her yellow eyes again, as if searching some far horizon; eyes so frank and wise, yet innocent and honest, with their brooding animal depth and power.

"I've been ill," she broke the pause, lightly. "That's why I didn't explain my nerve before. Seasick. Absurd in a woman like me, isn't it? For a girl going North alone, in my job and with my prospects, to cave in that way. But it's my only weakness. I know I can stand the grind of the trail, all right. I have," she ended, and without any note of boasting.

"Who — are you?" hesitated Gail, abashed.

"Never mind yet. But I thought you might have come to me," she reverted. "You noticed me so, too, and on a trip like this —" she broke off, laughing.

"How could I?" Gail touched his white jacket.

"But what's your name?" she put in suddenly. "I know it's not the custom among men up here to ask that. But I am a woman."

"Thain — Thain —" he said, breathless, struggling to subdue her spell over him.

She started, as if racking her memory; then her face brightened, but she shook her head.

"Why a flunky?" she scrutinised him. "I could bet you never were before. But it seems to agree with you."

"I had to do something. I was broke." He felt double the shame in this half-explanation that he had had with Snowden. "But now I've got a better job."

"Mt. Lincoln?"

Taken aback, he steadied his gaze upon her breast. Long, ringless fingers held together the grey kimono in which, without appearing aware of it, she shivered. Gail had a sense of having known her for years. Yet it seemed that the initiative had all been hers.

"You heard Snowden and me talking," he charged, despite himself. "Everything we said."

"Yes. And I want to ask you about him. Do you think he's *real*? He's so insane about his mountain-climbing. But he interests me. I wish you'd tell me what you get out of him, his ideas."

"Let me — come in, then," broke out Gail, excited. His hand shot out, involuntarily, and grasped the knob of the door.

"No, no. Not now. It's locked. No use to try it, Mr. Thain." But neither fear nor reproach tinged her voice. . . . "Lord, I envy you, tackling that peak," she went on, with an expansive sigh. "There's a thing I'd like to do! And I could. I know it," she ended, guilelessly. . . . "Only I'm tired now. But come up

here tomorrow, as soon as we sight land. Promise me. . . .”

She slammed up the lattice in his face. “Good night. Now go away —” It seemed as if her last words came through the blind in a soft, altered tone.

“Hold on!” Gail cried, then checked himself in chagrin. He stared at the window. Utter silence within. Had it really been open at all? Was not their meeting an illusion of the wild night and the dazing motion of the ship? Collecting his senses, he tiptoed down the deck, in keen reproach for his susceptibility; he leaned over the rail, striving to regasp his aspiring, intrepid visions aroused by the untrodden mountain.

But he could not. Her image filled him — the velvety, olive skin, the long, dark lashes and trembling nostrils. A woman! The brave simplicity, the free, out-door air; broad-minded, self-confident, candid, fearless. And at times in her keen eyes a sloe-like somnolence; a smouldering, restrained yet shrewd, dynamic passion. . . .

Again Gail recollected Rex’s insinuation, Madge’s cynical flattery of the women of the Youngest World. He loathed himself for his initial doubts. Even the gross Pritchard had read her more justly.

With a sudden impulse, Gail hurried below to his freight-hold and Rex’s bunk. He seized and shook the youth, heavy and irritable in a reaction to his drug, into wakefulness, and visited his slur upon him.

“Eat those words! You take that back,” Gail ordered, “or I’ll — cuff you.”

“I didn’t mean nothing, friend,” the boy whimpered. “Guess I mistook her. I only judged by the crowd I’d seen her with in Seattle. But I’ll save her life, yet,” he mumbled.

Gail dropped him in disgust, and groped back to the deck.

All at once the fog appeared to curdle at the touch of an unearthly light. Away North in mid-air, a spot in the encircling pall began to glow. The curtain parted. As in a vignette, there floated behind coiling wraiths of mist clear, crumpled peaks; all soft and white, yet angular. Lucent shadows tricked them out into things of ivory and opal. Land! Mountains! Dazzling alps! The fog sank through the sea, dyeing it with the colour of copper dust, which verged into a bright azure boundary along the base of the far range. And there, out of a haze exhaled from the twisting avenues of glaciers, the snows lifted their gigantic crests into a heaven pale green as ice. They caught fire, flamed in vermilion sweeping upward, burning into cloud.

On the sea a whale lifted a crimson pennant of spray. Nearer, the puppy head of a seal twitched out and vanished.

When Gail looked up again, the sky was all beaten gold. But the peaks stood out beneath, hard, remote, diminished, as if made of porcelain; dull rose; then violet—a flinty blue. They darkened with fast-streaming clouds. The fog curtain intervened, and all was gone; but it seemed to Gail as if his heart had soared away into the glory behind there.

“The North!” he whispered.

He grew aware of a steady tremor. The ship was under way again. Gail stumbled down into his bunk.

v

At breakfast, Mitchell confided to the romantic hospital nurse that Cape St. Nicholas had been sighted at

dawn. Gail, kept at work until the dinner dishes were washed, could visit neither Snowden nor the girl till evening. She did not appear in the dining-room, but during each meal the man's keen eyes followed him ceaselessly.

He had tossed, sleepless, all night. In the pantry's fumes of rancid food and hot soap, the bitter maunderings of the wizened derelicts, clattering and swabbing dishes, took on an unreality. Figments of privation among towering snows continued to struggle in Gail's brain against the mad, alluring choice: To cancel his promise of climbing Mt. Lincoln, to follow *her*, whatever her business, wherever, to whomsoever, she was going. . . . Yet — no! Snowden had his word; to break it would be dishonourable. Was not even his love that? He still was married. And had he not in that solemn compact with himself, on which he had staked his future, dedicated his heart to search the lives and hungers of all men throughout the North?

When at last he breathed the chill air on deck, it was deserted. The wind had dropped flat, and the *Seward* — without whistling, for there was no need in these untravelled waters — was pounding along through a thick fog which kept shutting in, then revealing magically, the dense, dripping cedars of passing islands. A grey headland, like a titanic bread-loaf, treeless and scarred with avalanches, ringed about with snowy surf, penetrated the moist gloom; and off it, a sheer pale-ashen rock, like a robed and headless priest, attuned the subdued and menacing thunder from a wide field of foam-flecked reef. Then beyond all, crinkled and shimmering through the drizzle, as if distorted behind thin isinglass, towered the ranges of yesterday, drenched in a pinkish glow, beneath a faint sulphurous sky. A

bos'n bird followed the ship on concaved wings. A troop of porpoises wheeled off into the obscurity.

Should he go first to Snowden, or to her? The man, he decided with restraint. But nearing the ladder which the mountain-climber had last ascended, Gail saw that the woman's door was ajar. In a deep pitch of the deck, it swung open against him. He pushed it to, but again it lurched out, so that he grasped the knob, the inner one; and the next moment found himself stepping over the sill, into the stateroom.

"That last plunge got action," she said coolly, without raising her eyes from a small red leather note-book she was figuring in. She lay on the plush bench opposite her bunk, her head propped by a pillow, knees raised and crossed, showing slim, strong ankles above beaded moccasins. "Sit there." She pointed with her pencil, not looking up, to the foot of the bunk. She wore the tight, plum-coloured waist. It came low on her neck, and her long jet hair was down over her shoulders.

Gail obeyed, speechless. The pounding of his heart annoyed him.

"Where are we?" she went on, still absorbed in her memoranda. "What's freight at two bits a pound per hundred miles, for two hundred and fifty? That's all right for flour — bulky stuff — but you'd think we'd get a discount on ammunition. Oh, but Charley cancelled that."

"Finding the entrance to the bay," Gail started. "There's land everywhere."

"But that moaning sound," she said briskly, swinging upright on the seat. She tossed the pencil and small book to the blankets where Gail sat.

"Reefs, perhaps. I just saw one." His voice

sounded uncertain to him. On a chair, with orange peels and an empty coffee cup, he saw two cigarette butts in the tray.

"What do you know, anyway?" she asked with a hint of raillery, and reached for her "makes" by the wash-bowl. Deftly she rolled a cigarette. "Tell me about yourself. I should say that you weren't — sentimental. You look strong, not only muscular." She smiled, invitingly.

"My strength has always played me false," he evaded. He filled his pipe roughly.

"Oh, I meant — character."

"That, too. I've been a failure at everything. . . . I can't tell you any more. Has Snowden said anything about me?"

"We discussed you this morning. He said that you —" she paused, "reasoned slowly. Had observed more than you understood. But that you'd *stick*."

"I haven't yet, at any job. But weren't we going to talk about Snowden?"

"Yes, but aren't *we* more interesting?" she cast a sidelong glance which fired him. "You and I?"

"I see meanings, my meanings in everything," he withstood. "But I don't always catch other people's right," — significantly.

She leaned forward, staring, with a quick move of irresolution. "Do you always talk to women like this?" she asked, puckering her lips about a smoke-ring.

"I — I've never talked much to good women."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully at length. "I suppose I am a good woman. Too good, as they go down around the Sound. One reason I've never had the show I wanted there, and came up here."

She, also, then, baffled by circumstance! Gail's eyes brightened, in an avid, sympathetic flood of curiosity, which yet held him dumb.

"You see, it's hard for a woman in this short-sighted, prodigal country," she went on, self-absorbed. "Hard to see the right ends, the big ultimate purposes, clearly. You get tangled, lost, in its momentary crazes, illusions, passions — mix right and wrong, the just and unjust." She stopped short, to question with vigour, "But what's that to do with us, here and now? After all, a woman's chief duty is to yield."

Her voice had lowered. She sighed dejectedly. She leaned further toward Gail, elbows on her knees, both fists clenched beneath her chin, eyes fixed on the coarse oilcloth underfoot. The touch of her breath, the emanations of her body dazed him. He felt giddy.

"What do we *care*, anyway?" she harked back, throatily now. "Gabriel — I got your name from the steward." Her raised look swept him, irresistible.

Gail leaped to his feet. Their eyes met, hers in a visage paler than he could have conceived. The smooth skin of her low neck crept and undulated upon its plump, strong cords. She tossed back her veiling hair. The penetration of her yellow irises was dimmed with moisture, yet their gaze scorched him. Gail thrust out his arms; but instantly they drooped, cowed and numbed, to his sides.

For one black instant he misjudged her. For the length of one insidious breath, he had misread her self-reliance, her high-striving intensity. And in the next, loathing himself, it was she who shattered the foul illusion.

"Wrong — wrong. My fault — always wrong!" She shook her drooping head. "The heart on the

sleeve. . . . But you wouldn't be a man if you hadn't stood ready. And by heaven, I do like you, even though you thought I —" Her face flooded a dire, dark crimson. "But I am in a dreadful fix." Yet her strong mouth quivered with the ghost of a challenging laugh, that broke the inscrutable knitting of her high and handsome brows.

Gail, still rigid, caught sight of his face in the mirror over the wash-bowl. His pearly hair was touselled, his eyes reddened as if he were intoxicated; the points of his high, savage cheek-bones aflame; the outer edges of his eyebrows raised satanically, and his lip doubled with its old look of scorn.

Was it all fair — in a good woman — to dominate him thus?

VI

Suddenly the ship lurched violently. The raised lattice of the window fell with a bang, and a cold whiff of fog rushed in over them. As Gail pulled up the blind, there broke out overhead a tramping of feet, a murmur of voices, all aft along the decks. He peered over the lattice. Ten yards away the sea ended against a wall of darkness.

"The fog's thicker than ever," he reported. "Every one's coming on deck. Those women'll give that prophet a good time yet."

The quip renewed her flagging cheer. "Sit down," she said.

Gail obeyed, but at once demanded:

"Who's the Charley you just mentioned?"

"Lamar," she answered, laconically. "You know him?"

"You're not —?" he began with a sinking sense.

. . . "No. I've only heard of him. A big operator." He recalled more definitely Madge's talk with Lena. "Fighting a crowd of dry-farmers over some townsite up here."

Her face clouded, but she continued to eye him. "I'm not what?" she asked. "Lamar's not my name, if you mean that. What could make you think so?"

"I heard Snowden yesterday, through the Social Hall door, using it to you," he confessed.

"Well, I am traveling for Charley. Up to join him at Torlina." Her voice hardened. "Aboard here they have called me 'Miss Lamar.' I guess it's as good a name as any other. I've let it go at that. And why not? For a single woman with my looks and nature, traveling alone to a place like Alaska on her first trip, a name like that ought to save her from gossip, from anything — disagreeable." She hesitated, nerving herself. "As a fact, I'm his secretary and stenographer, and have been for four years, since I came to Seattle from Michigan. But I'm thinking Lamar may be my right name, soon. Didn't I mention yielding?"

"Don't tell me you're going to —" Gail asked recklessly.

"No. Not marry him, just yet," she paused, bending her head, holding Gail breathless. He felt a moisture start in the palms of his hands. "We're only engaged to be. . . . Still, I'm not sure. You've noticed my uncertainty — my interest, even in you."

For a moment she lapsed into a motionless silence. Gail thrilled. She continued fervidly:

"I was in love with him, or thought I was, when he went North two months ago. He wanted to marry me then. But now I doubt. . . . I'm following him to test my love, my faith in him, in his works and purposes.

I want to see him in action. I told him I was coming for that. 'All right, Clara,' he answered. But I could tell by his manner he didn't want me, perhaps was afraid." She paused again. . . . "I just told you that between the principles and customs of this western country, and its strong men, how hard it is for a woman to keep her head. She's like to fall victim to the both of them. But so far I've kept my place, I think; my head up to it, a grip on things. I'm sure of myself, with any man."

She raised her look to Gail's. No animal gleam fired her pupils now, though they had contracted to pin-points. Gail felt weak, aware that the beating of his heart had become exhausting.

"But I'm going to help Charles Lamar, just the same, at our townsite there on Atna River, against the men from Idaho that are trying to grab it. That's only loyal to the man you love. Yet when you come down to it, from a lot I've heard since he's been gone, Torlina's the rightful stake of those dry-farmers, and Charley's wrong to claim it. But the Copper Trust, his trust, is God himself to him. Still, if I had my way, I'd spend my life doing justice to men like them whom it's crowding out all over Alaska. I'd give those Chyta Company boys all that we've jumped of theirs up here. They were on the ground first, and they're the land's real people, the kind it needs. So I'm going to Alaska to make it the touchstone — of my love for Charley, of my ideas and his, the worth of us both. And yet I could never go against him," she ended abruptly. "I'm a woman. He's a man, too."

"Clara!" cried Gail, despite himself, again springing to his feet.

A hubbub of voices, a loud scuffling, came from just

outside the window. The ship had trembled for an instant, as if struck a blow. She seemed to heave, to rise and pause suspended; then to glide on with a smooth, sickening plunge, in which no throbbing of her engines was sensible. A guttural shout, giving orders, boomed out above the general hum of voices. A hand rattled the latch of the stateroom.

Gail sprang to the lattice. The ship heaved and pitched helplessly. He braced himself against the door, listening, his fists clenched; and through the tumult he seemed to view, as if he were another person, the best and the worst of his nature in combat.

"They'll come again, if there's any danger," said the woman, as with a calculated calmness to direct the crisis.

"Clara, I love you, love you!" Gail leaped at her, again with outstretched arms.

"Yes," she answered, composedly, lifting a warning hand, but trembling. "Perhaps. But what's the use? We're both pledged." She spoke with a hoarse quietness. Her tawny eyes had misted over.

"To hell with Mt. Lincoln!" . . .

"Don't be a welcher. Wait — wait. . . . Gabriel!"

"Yes — besides — I'm mad!" He relaxed.

A warning blow fell upon the door. Gail flung it open, and together they joined the babel of the deck.

A crash shivered the ship. No sense of motion succeeded. Only a succumbing silence, instantly broken by a piercing, strident human uproar.

Their hands clasped. Gail's lips grazed her forehead, but she roughly thrust him from her.

VII

The panic had already voiced terror to its uttermost. Gail mingled with the still surging, shouting

throng, to find that with the knowledge of what had actually happened, its despair had subsided into individual chaotic action.

Officers, sailors gigantic in rubber boots and yellow slickers, elbowed about, roaring orders and incoherent avowals of safety. Gail saw the mummy-faced Waitt wearing a life-preserver with a fringe of straw protruding from a rip; Whitmead, the prophet, defending himself with his wooden hand from an hysterical onslaught by the lady from Spokane; the children in red flannel being consoled by Kilgour, as they wept bitterly, heads buried in the skirts of their livid and immobile mother, who gaped mutely at Clara's streaming hair.

Down on the fo'castle, Italians in short, tight trousers struggled under bundles of gay cloth on their shoulders, dodging among bleating sheep and bellowing steers that charged about, loosed from the broken corrals. Aft, Pritchard, swearing in torrents, with a drawn revolver, was keeping at bay the white-jacketed flunkies (the steward and the violent man in the black shirt clamouring among them) from ransacking the staterooms.

Looking up, Gail noticed the lifeboats hanging neglected from their davits over the foam-streaked, boiling sea. With Clara, he rounded to the port side, and there saw the truth of the disaster. The fog was clearing. Broken down and drifting across deadly ground, the *Seward* had brought up with her bow rammed into the very cliffs of a large island. Held in a rocky vise, full in the on-shore blast, she met the assault of heaving, sage-green swells, thudding against her so that it seemed she would break up at every blow. The in-

cessant roaring of a long reef which slanted outward to dim islands that were alps, and hideous with surf-washed, pillared rock, mingled with the thunder of breakers under the towering cliffs at hand. Their spray, shooting into a high thatch of dripping spruces, rained back upon the bow.

A scuffle broke out beside Gail. Two sailors were grappling with Rex Murkid, as he fought to escape, climb over the rail, and plunge into the sea. In a frenzy imparted by his drug, he was shouting to the Danish nurse, who stood near trembling and weeping with joy and pity —

“She’s a-going overboard. Lemme save her. Lemmy name live for a hero! . . .”

The white-haired old skipper stood hatless in his shirtsleeves and red suspenders, outside the pilot house above. In weak-voiced, spluttering Norwegian he was directing four sailors, balanced on top of a horse stall, to throw a line over to the ledge of a cliff that almost touched the bow. Gail caught sight of Sinrock’s sunken mouth. He was standing on the rock there, on his job, helping the sailors.

Snowden appeared, his large blue eyes snapping, exulting in his easy self-control. He burst into a nervous rigmarole about getting the women and children ashore first.

“Talk about luck!” he exclaimed. “Eyak settlement’s only five miles up the coast, and a wireless station. Says there’s a tug there’ll take us off. Thank heaven all my stuff’s ahead in Valdez.”

Clara greeted him, radiant, binding up her hair. As he turned away, Gail felt a firm, soft pressure on his hand.

"Climb his mountain," she whispered. "I shan't forget — ever. . . ."

To Gail, the clouds burned roseate. The ship rested in ether. Ah, how he loved her, loved her!

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER VI

SUICIDE JONESY

I

THE pyramid of a silk tent showed as a white speck mid-high against the wall of a rust-red valley. Around it, the July day's snowfall was melting upon a narrow shelf of moss and boulders, which a trickle of snow water from the cliffs overhead flushed with greenness. Then the stream boiled on past an old drift surviving from the winter, out of which willows were emerging gnarled, but with bursting leaf-buds, and plunged under again into the abyss beneath.

The tent was guyed down with cross-headed ice-axes, and three men lay between it and a hot but flameless fire of the willow branches. They were eating supper. Days ago, from the flat *tundra* to the northwest, they had gazed upward hither, covetously, between the portals of the towering Lincoln Range. Now across the void edging camp they faced a naked wall shooting up into saw-teeth, which dark and boiling clouds, defying the bright eight o'clock sun, ever sugared with a thin whiteness. Downward, it was scarred by the paths of avalanches, cut by grisly knobs and ruffs of rock, to meet a flat ribbon of desolation, a strip of desert laid within the gloom of alps. There the channels of a

river were etched in twisting threads, tearing along from the veiled seas of ice at the valley head. They glittered this evening like a tangle of golden wires, and meeting a tongue of dark spruce land, vanished outward into the flat and purple immensity of the *tundra*.

"Gail!"

"Hello, Bob."

"Four thousand feet and clearing," announced Snowden, wiping the face of his pocket aneroid barometer with a thumb. "Begin the big climb tomorrow, eh?" he exclaimed with a restless toss of his head.

"Thanks to them horses," drawled the stocky, over-muscled, short man with grey hair, stomach down on the moss, eating beans from a tin cup. "In a Christian country it 'ud call for block and tackle to winch us up where we come today. Talk of beatin' sheep at their own game. If that old ram we trailed yestidday had seen us a humpin' up them switch-backs, he'd uv hid for shame. That buckskin horse of mine'll be growin' horns and eatin' snowballs yet."

"Well, Jonesy, tomorrow's their last day," quickly encouraged Snowden. "If this ledge we're on holds up to the pass we saw from below, we can get over it and back onto the main glacier, without having to follow the river and climb the big moraine. The fresh snow up here'll be too deep to take them further, and they can eat their heads off down among the foot-hills till we three get back."

"Hark!" interrupted Jonesy, springing to his feet.

He craned forward his thick neck, listening, toward the point where the level of camp dipped sheer into their trail from below. The whites of his grey eyes bulged with an alertness that contrasted curiously with his

heavy features, and the scar on his throat, to which he owed the nickname of "Suicide," flushed faintly.

"You heard that noise?" he asked in a hushed voice. "Like a small sort of landslide?"

Snowden and Gail raised their heads, listening a moment. "No," they said together.

Only two sounds had been vying with the brawl of the stream in the willows, and they were mere reverberations in the vagrant air eddying among the pinnacles of rock above and below: the voice of the river in its depths, and the low-toned bells of Jonesy's pack-train, as it browsed just below camp — each heard echo-like, languidly, as if through some invisible door, now swinging open, now shut.

"You catch them horse-bells? I don't any more," broke out Jonesy. "Oh, you devils! And I seen the pinto a minute back nosing along the snow-bank yonder. Beaten it! They've hiked back to timber."

He loped off after them, in his muscle-bound way.

Gail again lifted his face, gaunt and tanned to a deep mahogany, from the whitish moss. The black of his slant eyebrows, and the gloss of his lighter hair were touched with sun-bleach. "That's Jonesy, always worrying about his horses," he said, getting up and shaking himself as one routs weariness with a wrench of will.

"But he's been the ace of this outfit," affirmed Snowden. "No matter how he curses our mountain-climbing for a fool business, there's a rustler for you! And now, when what I dreaded worst is over — the getting in here to the foot of old Lincoln — and we can look back over the hell we've been through, can we ever forget him, Gail? *Laughing* as he hoed his old buckskin out of

that quicksand in Kulana Creek, backtrailing that brown horse all night while we lay in camp too tired to spit, and then waking us in the morning with a mess of fish from the river, fresh as a lark." He gathered up the bean-pot, teapot and dishes, slipping them under the tarpaulins covering the sawbuck saddles. "He's magic with cayuses because he loves them. He's one of them himself, almost."

Gail shook his head. "It's you that has the magic, Bob, to keep us with you," he said, yawning. "I don't know but what Jonesy's right about climbing mountains."

Snowden laughed, impatiently. "Sheer hard work, the fight to get in here, has dazed you," he said. "That's all. You'll get over it. You've had real Alaska numbness. Only wait."

"My head hasn't worked, and I haven't had an idea since we hit the trail," agreed Gail. "And worse, I've never taken hold of things. It was like being shot from a gun—up to Valdez in that coal outfit's launch. Then the diamond hitch and fighting mosquitoes, day in and out. It seems we've been gone a year, recinching packs in glacier streams with the water boiling around your waist, digging horses out of mud-holes." He stopped short. "And I'd imagined once that something was going to be," he went on, lowering his voice, "inspiring, heroic, in this sort of life among these mountains. But I've missed feeling the way they appeared to promise. Instead it's all made me sullen."

"It'll be different when we're climbing," said Bob, regarding him thoughtfully. "No man ever wanted to notice how the fog floors a valley, or a snow range turns purple," he went on after a pause, "when he's backtrailing cayuses in a cloud of bulldog flies, or sweating

after them through dead spruce, with the branches screeching across your packs, ripping the canvas open. You see matters too close then. They've been ground so into us."

Gail turned away, ruminating. He had also missed mingling with the men of the North. They had met no one on the trail. But if he had lacked initiative, he had not yet known fear. There was the time he had forded Chyta River on the pinto's pack. The horse had turned turtle, and, dodging the mad lunges of his hoofs, Gail had swam ashore through a rapid. He had exulted in that fight for life.

And if he had been moody, he had never lost his temper. Yet Bob, nervous, sanguine, abrupt, had once flown off the handle on finding the bay mare with a sore back. It delayed them three days in one camp. But his temper always quickly reacted into an exuberant cheer; and at times when the packs had shifted near the end of a desperate day, and Gail would be swearing under his breath, Bob, pulling at a girth, would steel himself, contract his eyelids as with an amazing mirthfulness. Behind all, he had leadership, and an inhuman, fervid energy born of his ambition.

Yet under his broad hat and black head-net, Snowden's angular features had lost their rosiness, become drawn and pale. The quizzical furrows across his forehead had deepened, his shiny hair had lost its curl. His features more than ever seemed out of keeping with his strong limbs and lithe, broad-shouldered frame. His jaw muscles would twitch habitually. Whereas Gail, wearing no hat, scorning a mosquito net because it blinded him, and fighting the swarms with bare hands, had grown bronzed and sinewy. Neither shoulder sagged now. Bob had begun to be made sick by

smoking. Gail lately smoked Bob's briar pipe incessantly.

As they waited for Jonesy to round up the horses, Gail recalled to himself the day that they had crossed Atna River, far above Lamar's camp at the disputed townsite of Torlina. The Idaho dry-farmers, led by John Hartline, were at their claims on the upper Chyta. Then, gazing down the river's brown sweep and foaming boulders, deep in its gorge between panelled terraces, his unforgettable image of Clara — so wild and pure, self-sufficient, animal-like — dimmed by the battle of the trail, sprang out with an unwonted tenderness. It had seized him that in the final panic aboard the *Seward*, she had not revealed her surname. He had wondered what sort of touchstone the North had become to her love for Lamar and his purposes, to her own conscience. And he had failed to tell her he was not free. They must meet again; thus he despaired. For avowedly he had dared to conceive Clara as the one incarnation, through which he should ever reach the goal of all that life meant to him.

But Gail met Snowden upon an instinctive, confidential plane of sympathy and understanding, although Bob often seemed patronising to Jonesy. Yet from none of their long talks together could Gail now remember any self-revealing word. Bob had never explained further the deeper meaning of his passion for mountain-climbing, which he had deferred telling of in their first talk. In all this galling two months on the trail, neither one had testified to any consuming desire.

II

At last Jonesy's grey head, under his narrow-brimmed black felt hat, emerged over the dip of the trail. He

approached walking stodgily, dragging his feet after him, and with his chin dug into his chest.

Reaching the fire, he raised his face with hesitation. It was altogether flushed now, and his eyes blinked. He braced himself, bit off a cheekful of tobacco, violently, from his plug, and thrusting a leg forward glared at Gail and Bob in a kind of defiant silence.

"You didn't find the horses?" asked Snowden in surprise. "You've never failed yet."

Jonesy's features blanched, and their hard lines stood out. "I'll show you," he said with a rising, truculent inflection. "Come on."

He swung about and started down the trail at a quick, jerky pace. Gail and Bob, exchanging an apprehensive glance, followed, and soon found themselves running, with a stiffness from their two hours in camp, to keep up with him. The trail dropped sharply through a narrow gully and came out upon a flat nub of disintegrating granite. A slope of lush grass and waxy white flowers reached upward toward organ-pipe cliffs; but under the sheer precipice at their feet, swam the slopes of ribbed rock and shattered spires which they had climbed, beating and hallooing at the horses, switch-backing, threading a way from the strip of desert below, the filaments of whose stream now bore a tarnished glint as they gazed awedly down upon it.

The soft shale edging the granite was covered with hoof-prints; but no horses were visible in the grass and willows along the base of the cliff rising behind.

"I don't see them anywhere," said Gail vacantly.

"They've made a quick trip back to that timber," snapped Bob.

Jonesy, as if deaf to them, gave a hollow, rattling

sound in his throat. They waited, wide-eyed, for him to speak.

"Now we've seen them horses, haven't we, navigatin' rock-slides?" he began at length, half drawling, half whining. "How they nicker a-fore any resky step, knowing what's safe and what ain't when we don't? You've clung to their packs in the middle of rivers, while the rocks ripped along under water bangin' their legs. I've seen you boys wig their ears to steer them out of a rapid into a back-eddy, turning around to me with your mouths open and your eyes stickin' out, as if you seen the Angel o' Death. But they've always landed you safe, except Gail once, haven't they? You can't fool cayuses, God bless 'em. You got to beat 'em, wallop 'em, into danger, the same as across a quicksand or mud-hole —" he broke off, gasping for breath.

Bob and Gail pressed closer to him, as he stood there trembling on the nub of rock, leaning over farther and farther, peering into the shadowy void. Snowden laid a friendly, restraining hand on his shoulder. The skin of Gail's scalp began to pucker, and he felt all his muscles stiffen involuntarily.

"So I don't understand —" went on Jonesy, choking back a whimper.

He sank upon his knees, and one of his hands began groping, like a blind man's, over the surface of the granite. "Unless there's something in this kind of rock, sort of lying and treacherous-like, even to a horse, so his instinct — Because they was standing last at the edge of this. You can see by their tracks."

Snowden's eyes were following the man's shaking fingers. They stopped at a line that ran straight across the ledge, dividing it on the near side into a browned and weathered surface, but on the far into one that was

clean and flinty, glittering with mica and pink as flesh.

"Great God! It's the whole cliff that's broken off with them!" cried Bob, springing back as if he had been struck with a lash. "Over—they've gone over—every one of them."

"Killed then?" muttered Gail, dully. "Can't we see them?"

Jonesy, slowly rising, fronted their amazement. His face stood out corded, white. "No. Oh, no. Not killed," he said with a dreadful, falsetto huskiness. "They just floated straight acrost to them ledges opposite, on the wings they keep folded round their haunches."

"Quit that tone!" broke in Snowden. "Stop it!"

"But sure. Can't you see them?" kept on Jonesy, whining again. "They bunched up here, looking fer a way down. An' there they are!"

He lifted an arm from his side, stiffly, until it indicated a point in the depths along the river, which now was the hue of steel.

Gail and Snowden crouched forward, shading their eyes, breathing hard, with fingers spread taut upon the granite.

"Yes. I see them, lying there," muttered Bob in a hollow tone. "They don't move."

"You can make out the buckskin," added Gail, his voice hushed, straining his eyes.

"Buck! My buck!" wailed Jonesy, rigid as a statue.

"And one is smaller than the rest, though the same colour. It looks like his head."

Jonesy burst into a chattering laugh.

"Snapped off'n him, like an apple from the end of a

stick," he chuckled. "Oh, it's fine — fine — ain't it? What ken a man do now? What next, you stutterin' dudes?"

III

His companions shrank from him, silenced.

Jonesy, for whom in the bitter weeks along the Chyta trail, in moments when progress seemed hopeless and the outfit doomed, each mishap had been but a signal to meet the crisis calmly, with the strong deftness born of long experience in the North — brushing away defeat with the drag of an arm upon a halter, the quick adjustment of a pack, and a guffaw to mark his triumph — now was clouded by the helpless, questioning dependence that had vitiated Gail. And Snowden, who at such times had plunged in and ripped through disaster like an engine running wild, instantly faced this first tragedy of the trail with Jonesy's usual stolidity, and a placid hardihood implanted by the land.

He was the first to break the silence.

"Thank God we're *in* here, and their loss can't throw us now!" he exclaimed, squaring his shoulders and hitching his corduroys. "It only means two days' back-packing for all hands, along this shelf and over to the main glacier by the pass we've spotted."

"But there's getting back, isn't there?" wondered Gail. "After we've climbed the mountain."

"We could foot it in a week from here with enough grub to make Hartline's cache at the Chyta forks," said Bob. "By then his crowd ought to be reaching there on the way out from their claims. If we do get to the top, I guess we can stand a little trip like that."

It occurred to Gail that he was assuming success in the climb, while Bob conditioned it. This amazed him.

"And look here," Gail ventured. "We finished that last fishy bear steak yesterday. If we climb down and cut off a good chunk of that horse-meat, wouldn't it be nourishing to eat up there on the ice?"

He found himself speaking not quite seriously, partly in droll surprise that an idea had occurred to him at all. And it seemed to sound like a rebuke to Jonesy for his collapse. Also, he realised that he would have no revulsion to eating horse-flesh.

Snowden was starting to talk of paying Jonesy for his lost pack-train, when the latter, still glaring transfixed across the abyss, turned upon them.

"You hounds! You cannibals!" he flung out. "I guess you don't know nothing about traveling in this country. A man can't no more eat his horses, or even kill them when they're bound to starve, than his own flesh and blood. And Lamar ain't got the money to settle for my buck. Yer all the same, you yeller-legs."

He burst into a man's deep, racking sobs.

Bob plucked Gail by the shoulder, and with a look toward Jonesy of mingled compassion and alarm, nodded in the direction of the tent.

And as they two started back, Gail began to feel somehow stimulated by the man's prostration and outburst. He had an unwelcome, brutal sense that men deserved the pain of their misfortunes. "But I didn't half mean what I said," he exclaimed to Bob, as they dragged their feet up the soft scree close to camp. Glancing back once or twice, they had seen Jonesy slowly following them, pausing occasionally. He seemed to be listening to some airy voice, to peer over the precipice, to jerk backward from it, as if the spirits of his dead animals were rising to pursue him.

"Gail, we don't understand what their horses mean to

men in this country," said Bob. "This break of Jonesy's only draws me closer to him."

Gail thought for a moment. "The same here. But today I'm feeling things beside sympathy," he said, earnestly. He could not rid himself of the scorn that tinged his pity. Although at the second of the grim discovery his heart had gone out to Jonesy more warmly for the mere loss of his buckskin horse, than to the Irishman on the Seattle dock for the blight of his whole life, Gail could not subdue a sensation of superiority, as if he had sustained a triumph, which was the reward of all his sullen forbearance for weeks.

"But I can't get over it," he said. "Our long tussle on the trail was only a joke to him, and then he's made a croaker this way."

Gail continued to ponder the man's infallible efficiency in a new light. It seemed to partake of pride in the service of some hallowed vow. He began to see behind the dry humour of Jonesy's talk about their camp-fires, when lighting his corn-cob he had drawled of his early days as a barroom pug in Omaha, as a paid foot-ball player, a race-track tout, a Y. M. C. A. gymnasium teacher; of the "rush" days of 1898, when a Mrs. Batty who ran a tea-tent on Valdez Glacier called a miner's meeting, while men were falling through crevasses and freezing to death by the dozen, to grant her friend Mrs. Johnson a divorce.

"He always took some things hard," Bob echoed Gail's thoughts. "You remember how gloomy, but never mad, he'd get over Lamar's squeezing the Hartline boys out of their Atna stake? And the way he used to roast Alaska by calling it all a salted claim as a poor man's country, and say, 'But what's a man to do that hasn't even got the price to get out of it?'"

"Look here. Did he ever tell you what he tried to kill himself for?" asked Gail. "Do you suppose for a woman, the one whose picture he wears on that button in the lapel of his mackinaw?"

"That's his wife. But it wasn't for her," said Bob. "I asked him that flat once, and he denied it."

"A man wonders what he gets out of life," said Gail.

"I believe that at bottom he's more of a dreamer than either of us," hinted Bob with a sidelong glance.

"That would account for him today, after all his good work on the trail." He paused, adding, "But perhaps he's got all that living could offer him, or given up hope."

"If he's failed in the North I should hate to be him," reflected Gail. "He's cut to measure for this country."

This was a repellent thought, but it did not depress Gail. At least it was another idea of his own. Other men too, then, the seeming elect of the youngest world, were denied attainment in it through the weaknesses inherent in their dreams. Indeed, all fellowship that he had observed since his despair in Seattle, except his own with Bob, had been conditioned upon failure. But Bob's spirit was invincible.

IV

At the tent they turned. The watery purple of the *tundra* had flooded the valley, darkened the drear river bed, and was welling upward through the void in a tide that robed its cliffs with translucent zones of colour. The snow clouds had lifted, stiffened, powdered with gold in the sunset radiance of the upper sky, leaving the toothed peaks a stark, deep rose against its utter polish. On up the valley, the walls bore scarlet gashes,

ledges of a shiny, jet-like blackness, which converged around a titanic cataract of brown and rotting ice. This lifted, disentangled itself, into a wide, corrugated avenue that bore on its bosom, like two ribbed snakes, the twisting courses of twin medial moraines. Then, flung straight south, and cutting at right angles the wall to which they clung, ran a smooth white haunch, like half a pointed arch, sloping down upon a hidden gulf below the glacier. And upward across its dim snowfields, strained ragged shreds and streaming curtains of opal mist, as if seething aflame, yet motionless. Between them and the upper cloud, in a bright line over the top of the haunch, sprang out the focus of all the dying light. The sun, slanting through upon the veiled blue fields of the higher ice, was reflected upward in a dazzling line of silvery azure, which shone like a lamp through a V-shaped nick near the top of the arched slope.

This cut was the pass over to the upper glacier which Bob had spoken of, toward the northwestern spur of Mt. Lincoln — marked on the map but still unseen — which arose from the heart of the high ice-fields.

Behind them a sparrow began pouring out thin, treble notes; and from a crag glowing overhead the stillness was magnified by the woodeny “tuck-chick-a-chick” of a flock of ptarmigan.

“Our trail,” said Bob quietly, pointing to the V-shaped slit, with a deep breath. “Horses or no horses.”

“Can’t you forget those brutes?” broke out Gail. “It’s only four miles on foot up to that pass. And we’re good for over and down the other side with half the mountain outfit in a day.”

Bob turned on him, narrowing his eyelids. “What’s

struck you, man?" he said. "You never used to talk that way."

Gail felt the blood rush to the roots of his hair. "Well, I'm hot for it," he answered. "It's about time for me to prove something on this trip."

V

Inside the tent Snowden set to work in the disorder of grub sacks, clothing, and blankets to make up the back-packs for the morrow. He drew forth objects heretofore hidden in the bottoms of dunnage bags — aluminum dishes, an alcohol stove, black snow-glasses, brass instruments in cases. Gail pitched in and helped him with a will. They divided equally for three rucksacks, cutting off their unnecessary straps and buckles, discarding all superfluous weight, condensed milk cans, chocolate, pea-meal, tea and sugar, and the bread baked at the last timber in the valley. Gail with the axe hacked open a long blue tin of pemmican.

At length Jonesy entered the tent without speaking, his face still ashen, his lips twisted. His eyes avoided Gail and Bob. He threw himself on the blankets in his corner, and, clearing a place among the duffle, chewed a quid so that his jaw cracked, spitting violently on the moss every second.

Tonight for the first time on the trail he did not light his corn-cob and drawl about the early days in Valdez, or the avarice of Lamar, or narrate how Bristow, the English sportsman whom he had once packed for, had wanted to shoot a mired pinto horse.

When the outfit was ready, Bob and Gail turned into their blankets, each taking one of the tattered magazines that they had brought along. They had read every story in them a dozen times, and now restlessly

pawed over the advertising pages. An expectant tension seemed to have invaded the tent. The lonely, sea-shell murmur of the river far below began to punctuate the brawl of the stream outside with a somnolent irregularity.

"Breakfast at five, eh?" uttered Gail, finally, as if the thought was a climax to his long distraction. "We ought to get off in an hour."

Bob did not answer. Jonesy, hunching his shoulders, emitted a sigh, and, without turning his face from the tent wall, said, "I see you made three packs, boys. I hope it wa'n't too much trouble. I'd hate ever to hinder you again."

Moved by the resignation of his tone, Gail raised himself on an elbow, and peered at him over Bob, who lay between them. Snowden was asleep, breathing heavily. Gail sank back, a troubled look on his face, and in a moment Jonesy's stertorous breathing chimed in, uneasy, gasping.

VI

But Gail was not sleepy. For the first time in the untrodden spaces, he felt curiously alert and vital. He missed the sound of the horse bells around camp. Their absence created a void into which his loosened thoughts poured. His mind, usually blank at evening, began to fill with recollections and images of the hateful journey. But all sense of discomfort and sullenness had vanished from them, shuffled off like evil dreams. Life seemed to be again drawing to an inspiring focus, as it had on that Sunday in the train, riding down from the strawberry fields. And as then his musings set into a seethe.

The gurgle of water among the willows, the delicate

bourdon from the stirring desolation of the valley, sharpened upon his ears, recalling as keenly the roar and foam of glacier torrents that he had crossed, the shrill hum of mosquitoes, the night wind swishing the slim spruces of the North. The glow of dusky pink that yet stained the encircling peaks appeared to illumine and dissolve the white tent walls; to reveal the limitless indigo of the *tundra*; to conjure up as vividly long vistas of ranges the hue of amethyst that he had traversed. He saw the tawny floods deep in river gorges, where along wide bars under oval clay-banks the lint from giant cottonwoods filled the air as with snow, and dark roses sprang flowering from the impalpable silt. He was back in high park-like stretches, quite vacant, yet trim, as if well settled, where feathery grasses rippled, and the transparent leaves of aspens sizzled in the tremor of dawn. He smelt birch-bark, burning in the gloom of camps under the bright vault of heaven at midnight.

The idea touched Gail that in some manner his self had become a part of all such places, and their existence hung upon his own, upon Jonesy and Bob. That frenzied labour of the trail, which had swollen their knuckles and gashed their hands, thinned the cords of their necks, and, with smarting eyes, had drawn their faces livid, all had lost its venom. Likewise had those sights at which his heart always hardened: The goaded horses floundering neck-deep into mossy ponds edged with white flowers, to be roped and prodded out, kicking mud and slime; repacked. And the weary despair of nights in soaked blankets, when the mosquito hordes burrowed under the "proof" tent skirt, until the suffocating walls were black with them. They had stampeded the tortured cayuses to wreck the guys and

clatter among the dishes, driven them into the smudge fires to burn their hoofs. Ever those hounding insects. Amid rainy swamps of dead, dwarf evergreens threaded by old moose trails, he had mashed them into his neck until it was raw from their poison. Or in the sunny stillness, heavy with the acrid smell of crushed Labrador tea, buzzing clouds of bull-dog flies had swarmed on the horses' wethers so that the blood streamed down.

Gail knew that a time would come when he should look back upon those days and smile. The enchantment of distance! It effaced pain no less than it reared mirages of aspiration. Yet he was not to be deceived by the deceit that lurks in every dream. Only his love for Clara was immutable.

He found himself shivering, as though under some excitement; as if shocked by the acuteness of his feelings. Idle words passed with Bob, forgotten gleams of heartless curiosity toward the fortunes of Lena and Madge, clustered within his head. He had not told Bob of having been to college until they reached Hartline's cache; and then Snowden had said gravely, "Yes, but it's a better thing to get over." Yet he could not hold the spur of Jonesy's breakdown, and their wonder about his past, responsible for all the fervour of this new awakening. Gradually Gail felt it centring in a consuming worry that cloud and snow might check their next day's advance. Except as a grim task in which strength must be conserved for his manhood's sake, he had not on the trail considered the fulness of Bob's quest. It had been enough for Gail, wolfishly hungry each night, to drug himself to sleep with beans and bannock, assured of his bodily vitality to survive the next day, with a sluggish jealousy of his companions' quicker mastery of each dilemma, and a pride that he

had so easily kept his temper. But now a penetration into the reasons and rewards of mountain-climbing, as Bob must view them, occupied and disturbed Gail. He was moved by flashing thoughts that other resources, besides one's nerve and muscle, more than of will and pluck, must be called upon to win such a goal as absorbed Snowden.

His misgiving that vanity, and some itch peculiar to Bob's birth and raising ruled him, vanished tonight. Gail saw as in a mirror what on the steamer he had taken from Bob on faith: that as a defiant game, as a fight against the extreme menaces of Nature, to reach the top of Lincoln must be a test of worthiness to survive in this most ruthless land. Yet more than courage in its manifold guises had served Bob with a magic potency, quelling his impatience and chagrin at rebuffs and disaster, holding him ever the leader when his physique seemed to be collapsing. Snowden had some transcendent, all-conquering idea behind his zeal. Could it be likened to Gail's own?

Here his speculation stopped short, as it usually did when he weighed the motives of other men. Yet whatever this ruling ecstasy was, it should sway him in Bob's behalf. For Bob's struggle also challenged the purpose of his own aim to search the yearnings and despairs of all men in the Youngest World. It might demand of him at some crucial moment close at hand, when life hung in the balance, a dauntless valour heretofore unconceived in his remotest broodings.

He trembled, with unformulable apprehensions. Far down the valley a landslide rumbled no louder than a whisper. Now and then a rending sound faint as the crackle of a twig, though it seemed to impregnate the whole earth's crust, imaged behind his drooping eye-

lids a crevasse opening across the ghostly wastes of ice above. A slight wind arose, furtively bulging, now out, now inward, the pale tent walls. His swollen tongue swallowed floods of saliva, until sleep began to dull the throbbing in his temples and cool the moisture of his palms.

VII

An exclamation, then a tug at his blankets, awakened Gail. Bob in his grey sweater, just sitting upright, his thin mouth twitching in anger, was pointing to the empty space along the wall where Jonesy had spread his blankets.

"Gone. Sneaked in the night," he ejaculated. "Quit us. And we never heard him."

They faced one another, and as their eyes met, the amazement cleared from them. They brightened, realising the added exactions of their fellowship.

"I half suspected last night—" began Gail, with a casualness surprising to himself. "I believe he never intended to climb with us, anyhow."

Snowden snapped his lean jaw.

"I should hate to think that," he said gently, as the wrinkles smoothed from his forehead. "And yet, Gail—"

"Then let's head him off," said Gail, but he did not stir from his bed.

Snowden laughed mirthlessly. "The man's ten miles down the valley by now, and still hiking," he said. "What grub did he take?"

He sprang from his blankets, and thrust his head through the tent flap. "So we're alone," Gail heard him say, in a tone that was reassuring for all its melancholy.

"He's no more use to us now than his horses, is he?" asked Gail, an involuntary mockery tingeing his voice. He seemed to be held there, wondering. Bob slipped outside.

"I told you once a man must have enthusiasm for a job like this," came his voice, vigorous now, from without. "A do-or-die, unreasonable 'bug.' And after all, Jonesy hadn't."

"No, up there he couldn't be the ace he has been," said Gail vaguely; but his irony, toward Bob at least, was impersonal.

"We depended too much on him. He could never understand," Bob confessed restlessly. "That's all wrong in a game like this."

His assumption of their united spirit, under the abstract, all-powerful goad to reach the top of Lincoln, stirred Gail. He felt a qualm of awe at their abjection to its spell. Bob's blindness, in its mastery, to Jonesy as the paragon of yesterday, touched him as inhuman.

"It's the same to us as if he'd entered into the flesh and bones of his old buckskin, isn't it?" said Gail simply, as before.

"What made you think that?" shot back Bob. "Maybe we're at the show-down of the mystery about him, of the play he made against himself. Do you think we ought to look — down over there?"

Unseen to one another, their mouths parted in fear. But an irresolution appeared to seize them both. Gail glared around the tent.

"No — not that," he said, aroused at a discovery. "I see he's taken enough grub, near half our reserve pemmican. That 'ud take him to Hartline's camp. A man going to kill himself don't do that."

"What? The thief!" broke out Bob. But a brief

silence compassed his anger. "Still, we ought to have enough," he added.

Gail heard him rattling the dishes, and soon the crackle of the dry willow that they had packed up from the valley to start the fire with.

"Look at this," came Bob's voice, as he thrust his hand through the flap. Gail took the slip of paper in it. "I found her stuck in the coffee-pot," said Bob. Gail read:

Being contracted to you I feel obligated to say as follows: I had a daughter once and the Buck belonged to her. He kilt her in the Rush of '98. It was a kick while we was breaking him on Valdez beach. It want his fault for he didn't know no better and her dying words forgive him. She was stuck on that horse. That was what made me foolish once for she was all I had. But I ain't going to be so again. Then I begun to be crazy enough to think he kept a-living in her place because she couldn't ever die for me. But a man on your job needs a different sort of craziness to mine. Still I hope you get there and will give a good account of you along the trail.

"That tells all about him; too much," said Gail thickly, as the likeness to his own tragedy overcame him. "Unfair to him, that's what I've been." Controlling himself, he plunged out of the tent.

"Yes. If he's steadfast like that, I'd like to have given him his chance on the mountain. He might after all —"

"He's got more call there than me," muttered Gail, gazing down toward the desert stream, now a chalky green, as it ringed its boulders with collars of foam.

"Let's us — let's not talk of him," said Bob, serenely.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST SURRENDER

I

ALL the morning Gail and Bob toiled as if they were in a treadmill, each under his forty pound pack of bread, pemmican, tarpaulins, stove, camera, and the can of alcohol. With bowed heads, they paced out the four miles rising eastward along their shelf. Gail covered Bob's track foot-print for foot-print, close behind him. They would thump their packs upon the bleached, rock-strewn moss, resting against them silently, or in hushed voices uttering hopes and forebodings about the weather.

A raw wind sucked up the valley. A low ceiling of flat, ribbed cloud beheaded the upper crags of each wall, as if it had dissolved them, like some potent acid. The river traced dim skeins upon its sterile bed, from which an infrequent, wavering murmur filtered upward. A filminess blurred the sanguine hues of the cliffs, and between their culmination at the end of the valley, out of heavens all grey with a deceitful softness, the great northwestern glacier of Mt. Lincoln vomited in a wide ice-fall its adamantine and silt-polluted Niagaras.

They trudged onward toward the V-shaped pass in the snow ridge running at right angles to the valley. They knew that behind it the glacier mounted south and eastward into the heart of the range. They hoped

by the pass to reach its upper fields, from which arose the northwest shoulder of the mountain, their invisible first objective.

Forward! The sodden moss, scattered with small bell-shaped, purple flowers that had no leaves, petered out. Old snowbanks, sugaring away into cloudy pools the hue of turquoise, were edged with scarlet infusoria — the “bloody snow” of the North. A big clear pond, its bottom set with a mosaic of flat stones, marked the white apron-edge of the unending snow. A moment of sloshing into deep muck, and their nailed shoes bit into the soggy expanse, at 5,800 feet. They ploughed upward through the fresh fall of the last few nights. The slope steepened. They switchbacked. They slumped knee-deep through crust under crust of old snowings. Every score of paces they paused for breath; Bob drew out the aneroid; surely feet had been punished by hundreds; but its hair of steel would concede hardly fifty. “We must be soft,” he panted once. And the invidious, sunless glare stole with a vague aching behind their eyeballs. They fumbled in their pockets and snapped on the black, masquerading discs of snow-glasses.

Slope after slope. The under edge of the cloud-cap upon the pass squeezed forth snow-squalls which struck them with gusts and a pale darkness. Large flakes caressed their mackinaws as they paused, braced against their ice-axes. A solider curtain of inky streamers swung over them out of the right-hand obscurity. “Wait. It’s crazy to push on,” said Bob; but at once the gloom thinned, and he sprang forward crying, “Halloo!” They brought up breathing like sprinters at the tape, before cliffs pitted with ledges, set with crumbling spires — a mid-air Gibraltar floating against

them, which was the south wall of the pass which from afar had seemed so smooth and puny.

The other wall loomed out. They spread their ponchos and sat silent with success. In the dash Gail had felt with a novel thrill that he must beat Bob to whatever revelation was at hand. But only the faint tracks of a mountain sheep swept past them in a dotted curve, and the pale gossamer blooms of arctic poppies nodded on the rocks overhead. Onward, the slope sank smoothly into a chill dimness. Bob, producing his compass, tapped its dial, exclaiming, "East, south ten magnetic," and strode downward with a wave of his axe.

They slid, swiftly. The wind had swept the fields, and the crust here was frozen. Their boots crunched, crunched, out a straight trail that dropped them like a spider's thread, never stopping to rest, into the unknown,—an endless filament reaching finally upon a barrier of green ice-blocks, large pale boulders, deep pits of silt and gravel. "Ho, come on!" shouted Bob. "The esker!" Blindly, for the drizzle had shut in again, they floundered across its chaos, and out upon the flatness of the great glacier far above its ice-fall. The vague expanse had been melted, then crisped, into a glare of tiny, innumerable ridges of snow-ice. These locked about scattered chunks of dark rock drift, were cupped around even pyramids of silt that advanced gnomishly through the scud as they pressed on.

Dull to the lapse of time and distance, they trudged upward into snow again. Unceasingly their feet again laid the notched thread of their craft and destiny, until suddenly, as if the world had ended under them, the ice bit down into nothingness. Out of it welled a subterranean vibration. Bob rooted himself with an exclamation. Then slowly the vision of a blue lake

resolved itself out of the chill refractions deep in the chasm, the tremulous sound betrayed a river scouring in the trough of a crevasse its concaved walls of polished azure.

"It's longitudinal," breathed Bob. "So a big ridge must cut the glacier ahead there. And the northwestern one we want, I bet you. Gods, if she'd only clear!"

"You mean the spur that leads into the main western shoulder of the mountain, the one we've got to reach?" asked Gail.

"Yes, yes. But how did *you* guess?" demanded Bob, fixing his blue eyes upon Gail. "And see. Seven thousand one hundred feet." He held out the aneroid.

Instinctively each had freed the straps from his aching shoulders, and now began to unload the packs. They spread the big paraffined tarpaulin over their contents, anchoring its edges with rocks dug from the edge of the crevasse. At once a weariness crept over them, a soreness invaded every sinew, and hunger gripped their vitals like a sudden cramp. They drank the hot tea from the vacuum bottle, gulp and gulp in turn, gnawing chunks of twice-baked bread and pemmican drawn from their mackinaw pockets.

"Anyhow, this is our base camp," decided Bob aloud, at last. "The stream down there'll save alcohol. We won't have to melt ice for tea. We'll have the tent and blankets up tomorrow, ready to start the day after, if it's clear." He paused; then added with vehemence, "Anything to quit that camp of Jonesy's. Give me my pipe. I feel like smoking. You numb in your head again?"

"Ye-es," said Gail slowly, handing him the briar. "But I think my grouch left me for good last night. I couldn't sleep. I got an inkling of this business of

yours, the faith it must be to you, what it ought to tax me. But the plugging today has kept my nose too close to it all. Blotted out my mind, like on the trail."

Gail saw, as if through the fog around them, his keen concentration upon immortal rewards and the white world into which they had battled, bewildered by the nearness of all its ominous complexity.

"You're taking hold of things, though," said Bob. "It's the responsibility, with no Jonesy." He took out his watch. "We've been gone six hours."

Never before had remarks of Bob's sounded so inadequate to Gail. "Six?" he exclaimed. "It seems like sixty minutes."

Snowden again levelled him a look of puzzled wonder. He had expected the time to have been interminable to Gail.

He coiled around their cache the rope to be used for tying them together in navigating crevasses, and then one by one, thousands by thousands, they retrod the faint scars of their foot-prints. Gail was often in the van, and Bob, letting him ahead when they struck the unmarred crisp ice, noted the sureness with which, not glancing at his compass or asking the direction, he led through the fog to the piled ice-cakes of the esker, at the exact point where they had crossed it; and thence to their trail up the pass — its summit like the very roof of the world. There a soft, blinding rain had set in; but from the turquoise ponds, the familiar world of tundra and canyon reshaped itself, the first lifted above, into an horizon bright with rose and golden cloud, the other caverned and hazy, beneath a line of lucent indigo.

At the tent it seemed that the wet willow twigs would never blaze, the tea be boiled, the cooked beans warmed.

"Let her blizz all night if she wants," Gail yawned. "I can sleep now till kingdom-come."

II

And Gail did, as if he had been drugged. But he awoke with a sense that Bob had thrashed about for long spaces during the night; once, even, had cried out. But he was out by the fire ahead of Gail, meditatively whittling tent-pegs. Breakfast was ready, and the vacuum bottle full.

They cached flour and beans enough to last to the Hartline camp at the Chyta forks. The drizzle had set in thicker, but today with only the tent, blankets, and what remained of the reserve pemmican, the packs were lighter, and ten o'clock found them at the summit of the pass. The rain had ceased, and vagrant snow-flakes were falling through utter windlessness. Then, as always upon repeated courses, the distance down the slope, across the esker and up among the silt mounds of the gridded ice, appeared to shrink. The awe of first tempting the white vastness weakened to a homeliness recognised in each drift and boulder. At two o'clock they heard the drone of the blue river through its caverns, and were clearing the new snow from their cache.

It had come on colder. Nature seemed to have suspended her transforming forces. They pitched the tent from its telescoping pole, spread tarpaulins on the hard crust inside, laid their blankets, piled the grub about their heads. Bob shinned down to the river for water; the aluminum kettle was humming over the spirit lamp, and they were putting on dry socks, when a tickling, metallic sound on the silk roof showed that the flakes had begun to freeze. Suddenly the gauzy walls about

them burst into a glow. They might have been within an electric bulb. They plunged outside, speechless.

As if by some world-creating miracle, sparkling plains rolled forth all around. Ranges of toothed alps girded them, stupendous cliffs of a dazzling, lacelike whiteness, that were streaked by black avalanches which seemed to support naked ledges upon their thin, pilared paths, and higher, the mushroomed caps of hanging snow cornices. Drawing away, narrowed in quick perspective, everywhere arms of the glacier mounted, coiling upward, rough and ribbed like the backs of frozen reptiles, into hanging *bergschrunds*, which vanished into the tenderest of clear heavens.

The big crevasse turned to the right, westward, and its marble walls were spanned by a bridge bearded underneath with ice stalactites. Straight south across it, three miles or more, rose what at first appeared to be a lone, cubical mountain, thrust out upon the glacier.

"Our northwest spur," whispered Bob, pointing thither with a shaking hand. Yet as he gazed, the furrows in his forehead deepened, his eyes bulged from their large sockets and clouded over. "But look at her, will you?" he said, shaking his head. "All hanging glaciers."

They stared, unaware of breathing. The glacier broke upon the spur in a welter of ice-falls. Up its abrupt, square face, huddled slim spires of ice; leaning cornices sprang out. Arched caverns yawned — but specks of darkness. And eastward, to the left, enfolding the bulk of Lincoln within the heart of the range, cowered the sombre immensity of a cloudbank dense like ivory.

"She leads all right across some sort of upper amphitheatre to our west ridge," said Bob. "But we'll

have to turn this end of her. Try to get up some glacier where she joins it."

"Go which side of the spur?" cut in Gail, engrossed. "To the right or left?"

"The left, but not very much. Too far would land us in that fog, against the ten-thousand-foot wall that the map puts straight under the summit and makes unclimbable."

"There's the main ridge, sweeping up behind everything," cried Gail. "Over all that mist which looks to be a-fire."

Emerging beyond and above the square spur, towered needly ranges, rumpled hanging glaciers — an anarchy of ice-falls; and topping them, the western ridge in a bold, smooth line incalculably high against the ice-green southern sky.

Bob rose on tiptoe, suddenly laughing, as though helplessly. "Once we're up to that amphitheatre, it's all right. We can make it. We got to!"

As he spoke, the sun in the North behind them seemed to sink a degree or more, behind some dulling film. And instantly, downward from the empyrean of that delectable ridge, all was drenched in a rainbow fluorescence, to the torrent at their feet, chanting through the bluish shadows which also filled every scar in the surrounding snow.

"It's all too much, isn't it?" uttered Bob, his face crimson. "If a man could only believe it wasn't real —"

"Cut it!" Gail commanded hoarsely.

III

He dove into the tent for the camera. He set the shutter, glanced at the sun; crossed the bridge of

stalactites. On its far side, a maze of smaller crevasses hid their treachery beneath faint grooves of new snow. Bob called out to beware, and his lips were still moving, when, without a cry or audible crunch of the crust, Gail's arms flung up and he shot out of sight like a man jumping into the sea.

Bob felt a burning wave sweep through his bosom. He found himself plunging back to the tent, running dizzily in circles. He seized the glacier rope, dashed across the snow bridge. There, restraining himself with a maddening caution, he slowly followed Gail's track, poking the snow with his ice-axe at each step. A muffled, plaintive sound issued from the ice all about. Lying on his stomach, he began to worm toward it, through a sudden heart-breaking silence, until he was peering downward into an unhallowed darkness.

"I—I can't hold her long," came Gail's calm, steeled voice, distorted by the slithery walls. Yet by it Bob located his head, at first but a grey disc wedged between the converging planes of ice. Then, as his eyes grew used to the greenish gloom, he made out Gail's four limbs hunched up and braced like a spider's legs.

"Slipping . . ." came his voice, strident, yet sonorous.

The end of the rope was touching Gail's hair. He seized it, in a frenzy of motion. Recklessly Bob sprang upright, hurled himself backward, bracing his feet against a chunk of hard *névé*. He whipped the rope taut; jerked it about his waist. But the quick drop of Gail's body, relaxing its brace, ripped Bob's feet from under him, dragged him back toward the crevasse, clawing at the crust. For anchorage he lunged his arms and legs against every nub and crack

in it, until finally he checked himself, groaning, and found that he could gain ground.

Images of Gail's arms and legs fighting upward, impotent, against twin, glazed perpendiculars danced through his brain. He heard the *crrohr* of a cave-in upon utter hollowness. His muscles locked for a last, desperate tug. Gail, as if he had turned a hand spring, tumbled into the light, his face like dough under its shell of tan.

Neither one spoke until they had reached the tent, and Bob, having made the tea, was filling both their cups.

"It only made me angry," mumbled Gail at length, as if thinking aloud. "I was so mad, I didn't feel — fright or terror, anyhow. Thought of nothing in my whole life. Only the blood boiled out to my hands and feet, and my heart seemed running into water. But my head was clear, too clear. It was like some fiend had struck me, cursed my manhood. Then the emptiness of everything —" he broke off, staring into his cup.

"You felt that the world was coming to an end, because you thought that you were done for," put in Bob searchingly. "You were mad at being snuffed out, with nothing of *you* left behind."

For a moment Gail gulped at his tea; then started, spilling it.

"Yes. That was the idea. I get it now. You put it straight for me," he exclaimed. He paused. His wide crinkled lips, still blue, his dark eyes still shot with a red, defiant gleam, widened upon Bob as if he were a spectre. Raising one up-curved eyebrow, his nostrils drew into their old-time pucker, and he demanded solemnly: "How could you know that?"

"Every man craves that his life shan't end with him," replied Bob, meeting Gail's stare, but with an effort to speak carelessly. "He wants some form or other of himself to live on after him. It's the commonest instinct. Even of all animals. It's all that keeps the world going."

"You believe that, too?" burst out Gail, the fire mounting in his eyes.

"I'm here, climbing this mountain, for some such reason," he responded, now in a hard voice.

Gail's eyes dimmed with incomprehension of his own surging thoughts.

"Yes, it would have been different, dying trapped down there—" he began, re-immersed in himself. "I guess I shouldn't have been so mad—" his voice fell, strangely hushed. "If the kid had lived."

He turned his face, convulsively, to the tent wall. His sharp Adam's apple swelled and rose toward his chin.

Bob laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Tell me about him," he said with eager persuasion. "I've wondered if something like that. . . ."

"I couldn't," stammered Gail, "except for our being alone in a place like this, and just having shaken hands with—Death. Unless you seemed half to see, anyhow, what I want out of living."

"I've seen all along how alike we are, man."

Steadying himself, Gail stumbled through the story of his animal youth, of his vitiating marriage; of Martha's letter and the deaths in the lodging-house. He spoke without reserve; without shame for any of his disloyalties; of his paternal desire, without shyness. He told all except his love for Clara. She, as the living flame of his ideal thirst, the mate he had fancifully

destined her to be, was a being too sacred, omnipotent, even for this friend and for this moment.

Bob listened with downcast eyes, boiling water for the pea-soup, stirring in the yellow powder. The two men appeared to have exchanged personalities. Gail's sentences pulsated with Bob's mercuric abruptness, the while he, as though soothed and revitalised by the first taste of his coveted endeavour, listened on intent, self-possessed, his set jaw not once quivering, his pallor already suffused with a tinge of the hue peculiar to snow-burn.

The tent walls had ceased to glow, as, lifting his chilled cup of soup, Gail stopped talking with —

"So I'm trying to grasp what every man works and suffers for, the prospectors, traders, labourers, who are making this country. They don't seem to see beyond the moment, and its cash gains and jealousies. If I think I get at their bedrock desires, they always appear so selfish and short-sighted. And then some passion or surrender kills my sympathy, makes me angry with them, like with Jonesy. . . ."

In the pause, the rising night wind began to flap a rib of the tent. Bob moistened his lips, as if waiting for the ruffling, silken sound to cease.

"And a man like me?" he ventured, with a slow rising inflection.

"You?" ejaculated Gail in wonder, shaking off his confusing train of thought.

"I didn't tell you there on the steamer why I want to climb mountains," he said. "I thought you'd see for yourself — in a place like this." He drew in a breath. "Don't you?"

"Maybe I did last night," said Gail, deliberating. "A man must be some sort of a fanatic here. And I

was losing faith in the North as a key to men's hearts. But it seems to bring out the truth about one's self even more."

"Go on," urged Bob. "Go on."

But Gail, with a poignant sense that he was floundering beyond his depth, felt that he could not continue.

"Aren't there other ways of a man's living on after dying?" hinted Bob, half-closing his eyes. "Disembodied ways, but just as real?"

"How could there be?" Gail asked obtusely, puzzled. He was dulled by his old uncertainty in grasping a fellow's problem, when suddenly memory of the Irishman on the Seattle dock and his thirst for wandering flashed through Gail. At least, Gail blessed him, with a wave of gratitude, that the man unknowingly had guided him to the North, to here.

"Suppose I reach the top of Lincoln," said Bob. Aware of Gail's bluntness, he weighed a revealing manner of speech. "It's the highest mountain in the world so far north that's virgin. When I die, wouldn't the name of having done that, my name, live on after me as real as I myself, or any part of you, could; more real for the general knowledge of such a deed. A single life is lost so in the crowd."

"Say that again. It sounds fanatical—I told you." Gail's heart was throbbing, his forehead hot and moist. His lips quivered into a smile. "How could it?" he laughed, incredulous. "Only a name. But the idea is terrible. Let me think."

But Bob did not repeat himself. He hunched his shoulders impatiently, as if rebuffed, and lapsed in a moody silence.

"No other sort of success has ever counted with me," he muttered after a while, as though to himself. He

was reviewing his days cooped in a Wall Street office, among men with childish, calculable aims; his father's promises of ease and wealth if he buckled down in such a jail. Each spring there, visions of winds rustling the aspens down unknown river bends, of such a very day as this, had choked his heart, until the break with the generous, sordid parents whom he loved. He was filled by a bitterness that had no regret. He burrowed down into his blankets with a sigh that summed for him all the riddle of existence.

Gail thought: To wander for its own sake, grasping deathless scenes . . . likewise to conquer mountain-peaks. That was the primordial ache of two souls. . . . A trail, also, to immortality? . . .

They had hung their snow-glasses, wet socks, bandannas, from the tent pole. With their boots they now extended the thin walls taut, and packed their edges with snow to freeze there and stifle the rising wind whose cold had begun to knife them. They sank back on their pillows of grub and duffle, into the conscious silence of a first night in the lifeless wastes, waiting upon the drowsiness whose advent they mistrusted.

Now and then they whacked the *névé* with their hips, to mould it to their bodies. No sound scarred the silence, except, at age-long intervals, the racking whisper of a crevasse opening, or the muffled boom of a caving snow-bridge. Neither stirred Gail with awe or thankfulness at his hairbreadth brush with death. He began to feel torpid. A vague, uplifting dream was haunting him. Suddenly it was ruptured by a guilty flush of gratitude.

"Snowden — Bob! I forgot." He started up, half-asleep, in the bleary day-whiteness of the walling silk. "You saved my life!"

"Don't reproach me," Bob answered in a monotone, as if out of a dream. "Neither of our lives is worth anything — yet."

His words dispelled Gail's sense of being burdened with a debt. He discerned in them an intimate, prophetic irony.

"Oh, all right," he murmured, sinking back with a renewed drowsiness, relieved and yet the more oppressed.

It was as if some unworthy force outside himself, in the peopled world that they had relinquished, now immeasurably distant and below, had cheated him with a gush of sentiment false to their intrepid quest.

He slept. Yet, as if he had been awake, he felt Bob's body never ceasing to shiver against him, trembling in ever stronger spells. He dreamed of a black rooster with a scarlet comb running up and down, cackling madly along the snow-bank outside the tent. It seemed a crazy trick to have lugged him up there, far from his hens. But he was good to eat. And Gail was hungry. He started running to catch him.

IV

A ring of silver light, descending the limp tent walls, awoke them together. A clear day at last! Gail's heart warmed with a furtive hunger for its risks. Yet Bob, numb from sleeplessness though he looked, was the first to struggle from his blankets, tear open the tent flap, fill the stove and prop it unsteadily in the snow. As the water heated, they kept uncovering the pot, silently feeling its sides. They jabbed off chunks of pemmican from the large cake with their knives. Interminable minutes passed, through their noisy gulping

of the tea, to the second brew for soup. The bread was swelling in it, when Gail, peering outside, reached back and gripped Bob by a foot.

"The summit," his voice came hushed. "You can see her."

The ivory cloud-bank at the heart of the range had dissolved in the night. The western ridge carried the clear gloaming of dawn into the zenith. There, suspended like an iridescent bubble — now a pyramid, now globular; then with sheer, jeweled facets, catching the remote, up-slanting fire of the sun from behind the crisp and shadowy hordes of the northeastern ranges — the apex of the North flamed slowly, with down-creeping gold.

"Lord! Don't forget the look," breathed Bob into Gail's ear, each crouching on their hands and knees. "Shaped like a pointed cap o' liberty, tilted to the west. And 's every foot of her 19,100."

The sun pinioned them over a sleek, saucer-shaped cloud. And instantly, throughout the hush of that immature light of three o'clock, was exhaled an orange haze. It softened with an enervating mistiness the clean outlines of ice-fall and lace-white precipice, which a moment back it seemed they might have touched with their hands; withdrew them to vague distances, in a malign, refracting light. By the time the tent was down and the outfit packed, the wine of the morning had soured. Yet Gail accepted the menace of storm with a secret exhilaration; Bob with a sharp oath, as he headed across the bridge of stalactites, studying his compass.

"Due south," he said. "But not too far to the left — east, remember," he warned, pointing with his axe to the square spur. Its unscalable face towered behind

distorting veils of haze. "We keep along its right wall when we reach it. It oughtn't to be three miles from there to some glacier between it and the main ridge, leading to the amphitheatre."

Avoiding the cavern of yesterday's skittish instant, they slowly navigated seas of hidden crevasses. They circled among the random, shallow troughs of snow that deceitfully skimmed them over; poked their axes through these, gazing wistfully into inconceivable depths, between smooth, green-azure hanging-walls. Some they had to bridge, laying the axes from lip to lip of a depression to distribute their weight, scrambling across in turn on their bellies, with a quick catlike agility. It was impossible to keep a straight course. After each circuit, Bob hesitated, estimating their deviation, and struck out anew.

Hours passed. They forged on blind, through the moist, dead air, which it seemed should smother them. They could not see a shade of the toothed, surrounding ranges. And their senses contracted with their eyes, within the circle of the dim desert alone visible around their feet and moving with them.

Once Bob stopped, and wiping the sweat from his forehead, said slowly: "We ought to have struck the hummocks at the foot of the spur by now." He drew out his compass. "Did I say south, or south magnetic?"

"South," panted Gail. "You didn't qualify."

"Then we're hitting too far to the left," Bob exclaimed. "Your right leg's stronger — makes you." He changed course to the right, adding, "This haze is fierce. Tiring, depressing. Maybe we're foolish to start in it, yet without that pemmican —" he stopped short.

But in a while Gail, moved by some indefinable impulse, called a halt.

"Isn't this too far to the right?" he asked.

Together they abruptly changed course, Bob with a muttered complaint about human "sense of direction."

V

Suddenly, dead ahead, a chaos of huge ice-blocks, each capped with soiled snow and bearded with long icicles, sprang out crushingly, breathlessly, close to them.

"Those things ought to be on the right," burst out Bob, rooted in his tracks. "Still, they look possible. Shall we try them?"

His voice flagged slightly, irresolute, as if he depended upon Gail, who felt that such an attitude was at odds with Bob's avid assurance on their first day's climb.

"Come on then," he urged vigorously, lighting Bob's pipe, which he had found overlooked near the packs by camp. They fixed the rope about their waists, and mounted the first hummocks and benches of the icefall. Titanic snow-teeth and pinnacles enfolded them. The all-day grind began. Time and distance were annihilated to their minds. . . . They became insects creeping up some outer orb of icy coral, upon a towering rugosity honeycombed with dark and bottomless pockets, which now lurked behind soft, dazzling walls, now gaped out stark danger.

Their spirits were stimulated by the play of every muscle, every faculty, in the game against disaster. First one ahead, then the other, would call back: "I got her — this way." . . . "Your left foot on that rotten ice — it'll bear" "We can get around

—over that cornice.” They spoke with quick excitement. Their minds, consumed by this strategy, began to blur. It was confusing, to be checked and baffled one minute, and the next to feel that in a single step you had won a league toward the unattainable. The packs dragged them down as though filled with iron; the straps numbed their shoulders. At each halt Gail sniffed at his load to make sure that no alcohol was leaking.

They would lean back to rest, facing outward from the slope; on a thumb of snow that seemed ready to crumble at a touch; by the gloom of lateral caverns grinning in ancient and gravel-pocked ice. Bob would produce the aneroid, tap its dial, mutter the hundreds of feet conquered. And ever the vivid white walls glanced back and forth that windless glare which was the blight of sunlight; that searing fire which pierced their eyes as with needles; which despite the black discs they wore made each look to the other a grotesque man-ikin.

Sweat poured from them, odorless; yet it seemed to carry the smell of the pea-meal, of the mutton-fat in the pemmican, and the waterproofed cloth of the packs. Oh for a gust through the stagnation! At noon, without a word, they sidled along a shelf, and Bob dug the tea bottle from his pack. Their tongues were parched, but they ate without hunger, with arms lifted before their eyes. Motes specked the incandescence that fused into their sockets. “No snow-blindness — yet,” Bob tried to cheer.

As they started on, a muffled rumbling overhead burst into a roar, was abruptly checked. A tremor ran down the slope. Their eyes met, filled with unutterable suspicion. “Snowslide!” murmured Bob. “And close as hell.”

He began to hesitate, in breasting upward across the yawning mouths in the *névé*; to shin the curving brows of cornices more clumsily. But Gail felt fitter than at starting, a time today — contrarily — remote as their last camp in timber. The blank sky-line, ever close upon his shoulders, yet ever rising, challenged him to grapple with it, impelled him to an anger which was slightly flavoured with his rage when down the crevasse. As then, his thoughts galloped on, destructive, defying fear. He saw his escape as having rid him of some soft, desolating spell that had fettered him since leaving college. His sapped, youthful vigour flamed up within him, bridging despicable years. He became aggressive, as of old upon the foot-ball field.

Then hard crust twisted between the white spires, yet still too steep for foot-holds when clear of new snow. They cut steps. Bob called frequent rests, falling forward on his axe, panting after a scant minute's pause: "Go on." Or: "The height gets my wind. Doesn't it yours?" It did; but Gail would say, "Not yet," and avoid watching Bob brace up and follow. Yet they kept together, and each knew that they were making good time. Soon they realised that it had long been freezing. At a sudden levelling, they faced off into mid-air with triumphant syllables.

The nether world of blinding, hazy gold had curdled into a pallid greyness. Far below, flat, pasty clouds with frayed edges blotted the white universe, corrupting the glory of their altitude. Only north, in a vast concave tilted above the horizon, mounted a strange area of the tree country, a soothing cloud of violet.

"The amphitheatre behind the spur. We're up to her!" exulted Bob, thrusting an arm into the fog, as it closed in again.

An evil gust struck down, carrying fine ice flakes. Their feet bit into the wall without cutting. Gail scooted upward. "Hold on — come back — let me —" Bob shouted after him; but in a minute, and as one swings over eaves to a roof, Gail stumbled into a plain of soft and knee-deep snow which gave forward, portentous, into the obscurity.

No boyish victory of brawn and skill had ever thrilled him so. And soon Bob sank at his side, without reproach for the spurt. They strove inwardly, through the joy of achievement, to gather their warped reason and out-drawn nerves. But their eyes could penetrate less of the pale circle about them than when down on the glacier.

"Those sheer cliffs, east under the summit, ought to cut us off to the left," uttered Bob. "In five feet or five hundred, you can't tell. And our trail lies straight up among those ice-falls we saw behind the amphitheatre, on the main west ridge."

A chattering cloud of snow volleyed over them, and the haze darkened. The cold pierced and stiffened each wearied tendon.

"It's late. We got to find shelter for the tent," Bob urged. "Out here, with this blizzard coming, she'd blow us — over somewhere."

Trusting to bull luck in their success, not jabbing in their axes, they silently ploughed on south. In a quarter mile, a dusky wall hardened through the flakes; yet it seemed that their fagged legs, wrenched out and planted as upon endless quicksands, could never make its phantom outlines harden. And when it shot up over them like sudden night, smooth with precipices, streaked diagonally with wavy lines of pale strata, bristling with

gaunt rock pinnacles, they stopped in their tracks, rigid with wonder.

"She looked all tumbled ice from below," said Gail. "Not sheer cliff like that."

"The spur hid this. The ice is higher," explained Bob. "And now refraction makes her look so steep," he encouraged simply. "Camp, anyhow."

But Gail's eyes were scanning a big snow-bank at the foot of the wall. They searched a straight, gouged path, bordered with rough snowballs, that extended from it.

He said, pointing: "Those edges there are all new and clean."

"If they weren't, we shouldn't risk it here. What's fallen won't fall again," said Bob, enigmatically. "But I wish we could see the top. Then we'd be sure."

VI

They ducked their deadened shoulders, releasing the packs, and with the pole thrust deep down, raised the tent low in the white gloom against the storm. They cemented its edges under a foot or more of snow, flicked off what had seeped over the tarpaulins, and at last, dry-clothed, wriggled down into their blankets, in the disorder of grub and dishes. Bob scooped out clean *névé* from a hole dug by his head, filling the pot with slow handfuls which slushed into water. They bestirred themselves drowsily. Swollen from snow-burn, their faces now bore the same glistening coppery hue, as of lustre porcelain. Their heads felt afire to the tips of their ears, and heavy with a dull aching. Finally, clearing their dubious ruminations, the song of the heating water stole above the sandy *sfft* of snow upon the silk.

Bob, with a mouthful of pemmican, jerked himself upright, grabbed into the corduroy trousers of his pillow. "I forgot. The test of everything!" he exclaimed, drawing out the aneroid. "Eleven thousand five hundred, by G——!" he announced. "Forty-three hundred feet today. I told you we were somewhere. One more camp, man, and we try the trick!"

Gail, gulping his tea, was struck by the contradiction in such buoyant flashes to the pliable carelessness with which Bob had tackled the slope. Of like part was his revealing, searching talk, and at times his inept, child-like remarks. He seemed like two separate beings: the one burning with unquenchable enthusiasm, the other dimmed by a querulous inertness. Yet the stimulus of now facing his ambition had returned him that alert flush of the body which he had lost on the trail. The seams had cleared from his forehead, the muscles of his jaw had steadied, and his features no longer appeared drawn or too narrow for his broad frame. But he lacked that fervid, subduing leadership which Gail had assumed that his zeal would dower him with in the actual assault upon the mountain. His optimism held no overpowering assurance. It rather stirred Gail to misdoubts, tainting his dawning ardour for the climb.

Over the pea-soup, Bob shot him shy, irritated glances; Gail wondered whether from weariness and the forbidding glimpse of their way forward, or if pique rankled him for that dash over the ridge's lip. And the sizzling, gulping noises that Bob made grated upon Gail, who felt his will bending not to show annoyance. For the first time a reserve silenced them, as though each, under the grim exactions of the fight toward the summit, was jealous of the other; as if their reckless and inhuman height — the blind malignity of ice and

rock, all the immanence and lure of peril — had aroused in both that truculent emulation which is inherent in every man when no quarter may be called in the contest for survival.

The gusts of the rising storm, laden also with the snow swept from the fields, assailed the tent with fierce, tinkling broadsides. Bob clattered the dishes into the snow-hole, and each stretched out, back close to back for warmth. Again Bob shivered in intermittent waves, and Gail could hear his heart beating on like a flywheel that has slipped its belt. The tent ribs would begin, then suddenly cease, a violent flapping, as if wrung by unseen hands. Gail felt that some person was standing just outside, his stare penetrating their livid cell. At intervals one or the other would start up aimlessly, and then pound the freezing snow tighter upon the border of the buried fabric. . . .

At one such moment came the cataclysm.

"Here's our damned immortal —!" Bob's cry was stifled, smoothed back into his throat, by some rising, encasing, stupendous bulk.

No sound gave warning of the avalanche. It beat them down, pummeled, choked them in the pit of a soft roaring. It flattened out, prisoned them like fossiled creatures. The anger that had stung Gail in the crevasse leaped to a fury that shrivelled thought or speech. Then each, feeling that his senses had lapsed, found himself furiously lunging his arms and legs, gasping for air! for air! in a terror of suffocation.

Bob spoke first, stammering, "Who — what's letting us breathe?"

They cuffed back the broken tent-pole, clawed away the casing silk. Slowly their panic was tempered by the sly, desperate calculation of trapped rats. Any

thought of smothering, of exhaustion or the limits of carnal tissue, they abjured. Bob wielded the pot which fitted to the bottom of the alcohol can. Gail shovelled with the aluminum plate. They dug, dug, upward for breath and life; welcoming the dizziness that dulled fatigue; daring to voice neither hope nor hopelessness through the lagging hours, welding in each stroke the last atom of their strength, in their hearts deriding obliteration.

"We must damnably love —" Bob gasped once, "living for — nothing."

When they could stand in their steep chimney, they groped for the outfit in the powdery snow, packed it; then, digging on, they cut shelf above shelf, each at the height of their shoulders from the other, raising the duffle after them. Masses of the rough dome overhead obligingly caved down, yet only to tumble them to the bottom of the burrow, into a soft moil from which they freed themselves, unearthing the packs, feeling that they had quarried for useless ages, and were but rebeginning the ordeal.

They sweltered in the heat from their bodies. "Snow's not so porous — holding less air all the time," growled Gail.

"It's the height makes us short of breath," whispered Bob, hugging the delusion. "And she may be hundreds of feet up yet."

"Thousands!" boiled Gail between his teeth.

At intervals he rested his head against the wall of their slender shaft; and for this received sinister glances shot by Bob, ceaselessly scooping, until he, of a sudden, collapsed with a groan. Gail prodded him, mercilessly rubbed his face with snow, as he lay inert on their shelf; and when he opened his eyes, lifted and leaned him up-

right. He came to with a despairing mutter, and staggering to work again, rasped angrily —

“Fools! Fools! Of course those snowballs we saw last night were a warning!”

“Like being drowned, eh? Walking on the bottom of the ocean — yet alive,” drawled Gail, curbing his scorn of such simple hindsight. And then in a changed, cracked voice:

“Look! Gods! Look!”

Light. A crack, forked like a tiny flash of lightning, had leaped across the dome. It glimmered phosphorescent into the vacuum of the tunnel. They flew at it. Once Bob scraped Gail’s cheek with the folding handle of the pot, so that blood flowed; but neither of them noticed. The dome glowed bluish, then a lemon yellow. They were striking upward through a granular blaze of light, a clear, eye-piercing brilliance. Flinging their arms, whipping their legs, they rolled out upon flat snow, as if sprung from a mortar.

Easing, icy air rushed down their nostrils, prolonging its first breath into a delicious, immeasurable draught, that intoxicated them — set their astounded, grateful senses reeling. And then, as they reached down and lifted out the packs, the poison of the light despoiled them, probing into their irises sensitised by the long gloom, so that they squirmed their faces into the snow.

Yet they began to laugh foolishly, overcome by the miracle of their escape, wrinkling their blue lips and still black faces. Weakly they slid on the masking discs of their snow-glasses. But even these failed to shade into visibility the encircling chaos of alps, the glistening precipices which had sloughed off that murderous cloak. Thus, westward, where their plateau narrowed,

they were blind to the peaks far beyond it — those sheafs of bright needles under that naked and pitiless sky, and the crinkled, reptilian tentacles of the glaciers and ice-falls over there.

VII

"Past noon. She couldn't have fallen on us till near morning," exclaimed Bob, jumping upright. He felt that his eyes had at last got used to the glare; but on glancing around, they met only a luminous mist which had stealthily enveloped them.

"It's too late and we're too tired to tackle that cliff. Under this fog, anyhow," he went on, yawning, in the reaction to weariness and sleep. "We've lost a day. Camp here," he muttered with resignation. "Lightning doesn't strike twice —"

"Unless a man's short of pemmican," reminded Gail, starting to pitch the tent. "Jonesy. . . . Daughter or no daughter, we ought to have packed along some of that buckskin. . . ."

"Don't squeal," retorted Bob. "With enough tea, we can make it on half rations. But another delay 'ud fix us."

Gail checked himself, thinking, with a touch of his former sullenness: Why this accusing languor, instead of Bob's old nervous cheer in ripping through a rebuff? Gail felt no conviction in his confidence.

They reeled under the low roof of silk, husbanding the alcohol as they filled the stove. They drank their tea in silence; then sank back sleepily on their blankets, into the moist heat filtered by the tent. The hours leaped on, as they lay there open-eyed, yet insensate as molluscs. Oh for some roar in the silence, the steady hum of falling water! Only after creeping spaces of

time came the soft, smothered boom of settling ice, a grim whisper, hinting that all those forbidden spaces, like their hearts, still were faintly fluxible.

A golden-edged shadow began to eat up the thin wall, the image of their shelf's edge, cast up by the late sun sinking into the nadir of the planet, tingeing for a moment the cobwebby fabric, on its flight into the zenith.

Gail, sighting this, started up from a deep, cancelling sleep — an oblivion that had seemed to border upon death. He began to shiver in the uncanny, windless twilight. He felt the high, awing region taking on its nightly glaze of deadened, rainbow hues. He was strangely refreshed; his head clear, with an acuteness that amazed him. Surely a daze had pervaded him since the moment that they had reached the cliffs. What a slave the mind was to one's exhausted body! He regretted all that he had lately said to Bob, or thought of him, as unworthy and unfair.

He snatched open the flap, upon the silent starkness of a world still golden, yet tarnished, lustreless. Its sweep and vast complication annihilated all judgment of distance, keen as his eyesight now was. He was aware of Bob leaning against him, also gazing out. Some slant peak far away appeared to exhale a whitish puff, like powder, and as the hushed tumult of the avalanche touched their ears, they drew in breath together. It seemed to cast down their vision to the rough snow at hand. And slowly their eyes wandered off east, along their shelf.

This narrowed, sheered, over an abyss. That was as should be from the amphitheatre behind the cubical spur. Then they glanced up the clean black wall, at its bands of putty-coloured rock, its steep grooves and tottering pinnacles. It was foreshortened by near-

ness. Thus their eyes leaped west, immeasurable distances.

"And that's all the main west ridge — our ridge. We're on it, sure, Gail," Bob declared. "But look at those higher cornices. They always mark a crest. It can't be far above them." He pointed toward the curving caps of snow, drooping their traitorous, overhanging scrolls, and huge for all their remoteness. "If last night's storm made them, we couldn't have held the tent a minute in it." He chuckled. "Maybe it was lucky we did get stepped on."

Now their eyes, sweeping down across sculptured *bergschrunds*, among shadowy ice-falls, fell into another abyss, larger than that to the east — a gulf. It gaped, an astonishing void of darkness, beneath that pale emerald sky. Each felt the other's muscles tighten. Gail jumped to his feet. Bob ripped out an oath.

"On the horizon, there," he breathed, hoarsely, pointing. "Isn't that our V-shaped pass? And there's our first camp." They beheld the chasm of the river in the ice, now a dull smear.

"And there's the square spur, *there!* We're not on it." Gail spoke with a curdling directness, indicating the steeped brow beyond the gulf. "We haven't even topped it. . . ."

"Gone wrong — wrong," Bob uttered thickly. "Too far to the left, I told you — where that cloud-bank was. Under the big precipice. And we've only climbed up to it, here where the slide fell. There's our amphitheatre . . . over there. . . ." His voice broke. "Cut off. . . ."

"What'll we do then?" probed Gail coldly, yet loathing his own dependence. He felt his lips twist with scorn, but he trembled, unable to face Bob.

Snowden, jerking about, had pinioned him with his eyes. Their deep-socketed dark blueness was black, as he stood there in his corduroys and grey sweater, motionless; his flat, skeleton-thin cheeks taut and creeping with resolution, towering over Gail. And Gail, in his tattered khaki, flinched from him, quivering his bleached and up-curving eyebrows.

“Do? Go to it, by God!” Bob blazed. “Up across there, where the slide came down — diagonally, holding to those pinnacles, those gullies, those pasty streaks of rock, with my eyelids if I’ve got to. What d’you think I am — that I’m a-climbing for —?”

Gail surrendered. He withered within himself, in self-reproach for his puny grasp of the Soul in such a Man.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND

I

IN the night, a wraith with Martha's dark, supplicating eyes floated across the chaos of Gail's dreams.

Peering through the tent-flap, they saw that the wan sky was cloudless. Westward the frozen cataracts, ribbing the sharp angles of the main ridge, exhaled an enchanted, waxy pallor. Downward they plunged into a dusky welter of hanging ice and snow-streaked cliff, all with the somnolent, metallic gleam of polished flint.

Warmed by the tea, their frozen boots hammered on, tent down and the packs made, they started up the rough bosom of the slide. The settled windless air calmed their excitement at the impact of the decisive hours ahead. The surface, melted then frozen, held them, and bit straight into the great precipice, whose face bore the dark iridescence of the night that had elsewhere fled. It met them between two spires like the armless torsos of giants in effigy. A groove in one of the bands of pale rock, a kind of porphyry, shot up at a steep angle across the glossy slate; and to the west, their direction. Soon easing blemishes, invisible from below, appeared to spread up the slope; scant patches of grimy snow that gave soothing footholds, sliding scree that dragged their tread down slimily.

A gully folded over their heads into a rock chimney.

Emerging at its top, Gail saw Bob's wide eyes sparkling. A miracle had flooded them. In the furnace-touch of the four o'clock sun, their chalky realm had burst into a fiery translucence. Its coat of rime created a world furred over with glittering tinsel. "One more day of this, one good camp, and then the top," exclaimed Bob. He looked up and led on. "Bet you, Gail, we'll be cutting steps and punching cornices by noon."

His gaiety cheered Gail's humility of the night before, as his transcendent outburst then had dispelled all Gail's apprehensions.

But exaggerated by foreshortening as the wall had been, it was nearly sheer. Climbing became acrobatic; a test more of arms and biceps than of calves and toe-space. Their first illusion that this clean, goat-like toil was easier than ploughing up through the yielding treachery of snow, passed in a quicker breathlessness, a more leaden down-bearing of the packs upon their shoulders. For each step upward across talus, they slipped back two, hewing their axes forward, feeling sucked toward the precipice under, over which the rock drift, moving in slow, relentless veins, seemed to rattle straight into the tramped circle and black tea leaves on the snow of camp.

"Mountain sickness. That's the one thing, and the worst, can do us now," said Bob once, as they rolled into a shelf that slit the face of rock. Their lungs expanded like bellows, sucking in each breath as if it were their last.

Again the lapse from exaltation to mistrust. Bob veered his set face, quivering, away from the spectral abyss. Gail wondered what deeper strain his words concealed. But could any man in the stress of such a quest, least of all gripped by his indomitable aim, stay

ever equable? What matter, provided his guiding spirit did not cease to flame?

They wormed up more chimneys, scarring their fingers, even through the gloves on them. Their packs swung like pendulums, yanking their backs out and downward, as if from some repellent magnetism in the rock. Each new stretch of cracks and pinnacles staggered them backward with its convexity. The whitish rock was rotten and powdered in their grip. Unable to estimate the distance or angle of foot- and hand-holds, they braced themselves, galvanically — and plunged.

They felt rashly impelled into trap after trap, where they swayed, overbalanced, tricked and doomed. The precipice had lured them in bravado, and having cast the die, they made pride of manhood down their love of life, silence any word of despair or retreat. The hidden crevasses of two days back were child's play to these jutting ruffs of slate. They would gain an abutment, fall safe behind it, fasten the whole length of their arms and bodies tight upon its sheeted rock, as if some fiend were striving to dislodge them. And the sweat that started in the palms of their hands, that poured from their foreheads, smarting in their eyes, tasted thicker, saltier, than any perspiration from mere wearing tissue.

"Gail, you climb like a steeple-jack. You don't seem to care," gasped Bob, knotting himself under an arch. "I have to grip myself, to choke the crazy impulse to jump off."

Gail shuddered, frowning. "I'm all right — so long as my hands stick," he panted. His feelings, dimmed by incessant reckoning against perdition, were aroused by Bob's words. "Then I'm sure of myself, like a swimmer on the surface — no matter how deep the bottom."

"That's because you don't feel. It all means nothing to you," retorted Bob. "The whiteness of everything swings me round like a squirrel in a cage."

"Why the hell then —" But Gail checked himself with a flush of shame. He dug a handful of snow from the crevice, and swallowed it.

"I love it — to imagine how it would feel, through and through me, to be shooting down there," Bob went on, "with all that glory whirling to my eyes, my heart upside down, the ice grinding in. . . ."

Gail, stiffening, cast him a look of dread and foreboding.

"Oh, that's only height-fear," Bob laughed, but with a slight cackle. "I've allowed for it. . . . And don't eat snow. . . ."

He scooped up a handful himself, and guzzled it.

II

Slim, organ-pipe cliffs had long reared over them an unending curtain. But noon found them hoisting over a sharp lip, wallowing into a pocket of soiled snow. The spot where they had camped had drawn itself in, becoming but a narrow shelf far to the east in the great wall. They looked down upon the glaciers like maps, whose arms — the tentacles of cuttle-fish — they could follow twisting into range upon range of alps that shimmered with the glint of broken opals, over which they falsely seemed to tower.

When Gail spoke of eating, Bob shook his head, and pressing his stomach, said, "It would make me vomit." He took a couple of gulps from the vacuum bottle, and throwing himself face down, lay motionless. Gail swallowed tea and gnawed pemmican; drew the aneroid from Bob's pocket; saw with a sinking, deso-

late heart that it registered but 13,000 feet. They had risen but 1,500 on their diagonal course.

He shouted this to Bob, who, as if he had divined it, scrambled up the cliff, over its brow — into limitless snow again. It was quite as perpendicular as the rock, yet smooth and frozen like iron. Clapping on their glasses, they began to cut steps, in turn today, to harbour strength, counting them, passing one another at each hundred. The slope sheered to ice. The cutter hacked, hacked the flinty glaze, slowly, gingerly balancing himself, his head against the upright field, pawing the powdered ice out of each foot-hold, testing it with his down-trodden boot, until the reckless leap-up of tautened muscles. And when he paused for the other to pass and cut, he carved an extra step, dizzily contorting himself, braced with his back to the slant. Their four hands groped entangled over the ice, like blind men's, and with trembling lips they avoided one another's eyes. Each hewed until his arms ached with his head, his fingers loosened insensible on the axe handle; and when resting they could not take off their out-levering packs, which began to feel alive, designing to spill them over. . . .

Once, out of nothingness, as if their panting had exhaled it, the woolly globe of a cloud enclosed them, ballooned caressingly upward. Then another and another, with an awful hint of the sky's fertility to blot their sight, to stall them at that giddy balance. And again the diffused, refracting rays inflamed and tortured their jaded pupils. Light so fierce and cruel was unbelievable. With unstrung nerves, they snatched off the glasses, dug their foreheads into the dazzling wall. They stroked their irises against its cold. Prisoned as within a burning glass, at the heart of its

focus, they waited through moments that seemed hours in an illusion that the world was upside down upon their heads.

But toward four o'clock this cloud-forming ceased. The wall relaxed its pitch. They zigzagged, still west, across the bulging paunches of great *bergschrunds*, from which shapeless gargoyles drooled down, fringed with icicles that guarded pale green caves. All Alaska girded them, a bluish concave; and set in its pit, like clustered pearls, swam countless peaks — bubbles veiled by a foamy wrack of cloud. A faint air from the east pierced the crinkling windlessness with a hateful hint. Bob paused at a cone of reddish rock that broke the crust, and pointed downward.

"We're over it. There's the square spur — and the amphitheatre we hit for," he said. "We're a thousand feet above it, on the main wall, Gail." He looked up the steep, tantalising beyond, ever unfolding higher, and his voice dropped, steeled. "But we got to make the crest of the ridge tonight. There's no level here to camp, except on these gargoyles, and we can't trust them to hold. . . . Better cache half our pemmican here for the return, eh?"

As Bob kicked a hole beside the cone, Gail, staring into the smooth bowl of the amphitheatre, drew out the gnawed chunk from his pack. With it, he produced the round can of alcohol. He shook this. The liquid inside sloshed about with a weak, treble splash.

At the sound, Bob looked up as if he had been struck.

"What's become of it?" he cried. "Has she leaked?"

"No." Gail squared his jaw and shook his head. "There's about four more boils left," he said, "as I calculated this morning."

"Is there, oh, is there?" laughed Bob unwholesomely. "We'll take stock on top of the ridge tonight. I tell you, man —"

III

A sandy rumbling from below checked him. It flushed into a roar. Straight upward from their feet ripped a fissure, with a grinding, shivering report. There was a flash of sea-green facets, and they felt themselves tilt and swing. They whipped over on their stomachs, flinging their arms about the red cone, screwing their toes into the crust. But it dropped away under them, in a rising geyser of ice particles. They seemed to be falling backward, yet holding to the rock in mockery of balance. The uproar mounted into a sphere-shaking thunder, and in a frenzy of contracting sinews, they landed hunched and breathless in the patch of snow above the cone.

Thudding echoes, and then silence. As before, all around them was snow, yet tons of it had dropped away, in a great angle below and to the left, sheer and jagged for fathoms down, with the avalanche that had started at their knees. Quaking with glad amazement, they looked at the tips of their mits, tinged with the soft scarlet of blood.

"That — that's worth living for — a tight squeak like that!" exclaimed Bob. "Think how it must 'a' mashed anyone following us."

"Following us," muttered Gail. "You're mad."

"You got to be up here," he flashed back, joyously. "You said so yourself." He narrowed his eyelids, as if someone were tickling him.

Gail staggered on, bewildered and revulsed.

Ever upward they hacked, from hard bench to

bench. The malign, refractive light lifted levels into steeps, smoothed steeps into deceitful levels. Often, feeling for the wall, they pitched forward into nothingness; or certain that they advanced through space, crunched their heads against hard *névé*. The thin lip of a cornice bowed over them. They swung sideways up its curve, in a speechless faith that they were topping the ridge. But from its summit, the white hummocks only billowed higher, as an endless blaze that killed hope as it withered their eyes.

Gail gave a random poke with his axe handle. The surface ground away into blue-glazed spaces. Trapped in a maze of crevasses again!

And instantly Bob, like a moth into a candle, ducked his head into that cavern, with a sharp cry.

"Eyes — my eyes!" His voice issued, resounding, thinned. He swept his arms into the hole, wiping the backs of his hands slowly across the closed lids, as if trying to discern some vision upon them.

"Snow-blindness?" Gail questioned softly, choking back the dire dread that shook him.

"Knew it — I knew it," Bob groaned. "It was bound to come. . . . But don't camp here. . . . And it's pain, I tell you," he added, as with a triumphant stoicism.

Wrenching himself from the hole, he floundered to his feet, reeled on.

IV

Gail had cut steps, fitted Bob's feet into them, guided him up sapphire gullies. He had laid their axes side by side across the faint lines that everywhere girded the slope, sinisterly to gulf them; pressed his hands on the wood to start him groping over. Such navigation

had set Gail's aching head awirl. The pain in his arms bit deeper, his gasping grew wilder than at any hacking, as he thrust in the axe at every step, to clitter away into voids. He had done everything except push Bob upward, all but supply that relentless power which goaded him on, dumb and uncomplaining.

For long Gail had aimed toward a great overhanging lip, flat and glistening underneath. He did not now fight with the challenged aggression of the first day's climb; he could scarcely feel, let alone reason about, the obscure, consuming spell that forced him higher. And now, with Bob hanging at full length from the handle of his buried axe, Gail felt his own head touching that glazed ceiling. It seemed to stretch, impassable, across the dimming splendour of all Alaska. There was no way up but through it. Cutting twin foot-holds, he lifted his axe and began to hew.

But through the sharp rain of slivered crystals, danced in the back of his eyes the smooth caps of cornices which had cracked soggly, as they had scrambled off them in fountains of fine snow; there floated his suffering, human burden, that lank form, now limp, now like stone, his brow wrapped in a red bandanna, his breath hissing between his teeth.

Then he was struggling with it in his arms, up a glazed chute. His head throbbed as if it were being hacked open. He could stand it no longer. Bob was slipping from him—they were falling together. He felt his body hurtling, upon his stomach as an axis, his feet flung clattering across rough ice, his hands gripping the hair of a head that shouted in sardonic defiance. Then a blow upon his groin. . . .

Gail opened his eyes, and something clicked soothingly behind his forehead. Suddenly his brain was

keener than the pain that split it. He was on top of the long cornice, with Bob face down beside him. It did not seem that he had struggled there, but that they both had been lifted thither by the kindly twilight of that cloud-wrapped zenith.

"Turn and turn about, hey?" Bob's voice came to him, quavering from very far. "You saved me, Gail. . . . But why not have let her slide? . . . I got a flash of sight when we hit that nub. The second time I could go it myself. . . ."

"Oh — now —" stammered Gail, stemming the hot flood that surged upon his eyes. "Now I — understand you — all your talk about why we live."

v

The shelf of snow, jutting into the unutterable height, gave scarcely two yards of level. A gust would sweep them out, like feathers, into space. And grey clouds in the deeps of the world were brimming upward as in a filling cauldron.

Gail fumbled with the silk and broken pole; thrust Bob, blind and flaccid again, into his blankets; set the stove and melted snow.

Bob recoiled from his tea. "Save the leaves," he murmured. "Spread them on my eyes. It's the only help." He turned his sealed lids toward Gail, and at once broke out into talk. As Gail poulticed them, it awed him how Bob's mercuric nature thus instinctively relieved the tension. He rattled on about snow-blindness on his climbs in Switzerland and the Caucasus. He not once mentioned the shortness of grub and alcohol, that they had failed to reach the top of the ridge, or had camped upon a traitorous gargoyle. This seemed to be a designed, ostrich-like disregard; and

yet, granting the sublimity of their adventure, Gail reflected, was it not conceived less in cowardice than courage?

Bob's cheer was electric, his enthusiasm once more infectious. Yet dependence still streaked it. But this tonight, instead of depressing Gail, warmed his resolution and self-confidence. It provoked his virility to hold a momentary leadership over one who was at once the prophet and the toiler in a faith so exacting and relentless.

Only the furtive stillness was ominous and dispossessing. It accented, in the pauses of Bob's bright talk, the gasping bravery with which he controlled his torture. The thought of having ever grated upon one another, or of jealousy and emulative pique, seemed irreverent to the coldest aspect of their fellowship. And all Gail's speculation upon the rewards of Bob's ambition, which had been working through him like yeast since he had grasped its physical challenge, he felt was brightening in the glow of an imminent, deeper revelation. It dawned through him that whatever this might be, it was inspired by his saving of Bob's life. Gail reviewed how his secrets had been penetrated by Bob after that other rescue. And he was aware that his old sluggishness in reading any man's inner thought was quickening.

Bob felt in his pocket, held up the brass disk of the barometer for Gail to read. Its fragile hand pointed to 14,100 feet. "If we'd been any good," mumbled Bob, "we'd have been here at noon yesterday."

He went on, movingly: "Feel the world, don't you, swinging down there under us, on some other pivot? As if we were the only beings fixed in it. And the grins of those ice caverns — our faces, part of us — the

cornices alive, too. . . . The glaciers dropping away, trying to sicken your sight. Our bodies warming this snow bracket, like oil creeping through sand. So the next minute, *now* —" his voice rose to a cry — "we're revolving bundles through space. . . ."

Gail found his mind reflecting Bob's images, fearlessly, fascinated. And he remembered that the more fantastic such utterance had been, the more efficiently Bob had faced each crisis.

"Being haunted like that is part of the joy of the fight," said Bob with a sane distinctness. "But you must surpass that. It's wearing, waste of the body, and the body's always chief. Be blind to it. Seize on the will to get there, work the fever inside you." He hesitated, adding gravely, "No man or woman has the power, the divinity of life, to give himself to more than one purpose — one that lives on after. . . . For each of us there's an immortality, one way a man can survive himself. But there are a hundred ways in all, and every man's can be different."

His running flame of thought fired Gail's intuitions. Turgid, perhaps fatuous as Bob's words were, particularly for this hour and this crisis, they yet seemed to epitomise the truths beneath its fusing drama.

"Hold on!" broke out Gail. "I want to ask you —"

"What?"

Gail caught his breath. It was as if a light were blinding him. "Have you ever been in love?" he asked. The words leaped, irresistible, to his lips, from the splendid, ever-present mirage of one delectable memory.

"Aren't I, now?" Bob responded solemnly, knitting

his brows. "With all this. And all that comes of this, if we get there."

For an instant Gail was taken a-back, disappointed. "But with a woman, Bob?" His still seemed a cold, inhuman goal.

"Don't you *see*?" Bob gave a blind, impatient fling of one arm. "Woman or mountain, it's the same. Each transfigures you, enchants, gives life truth and wings, and gladness — Immortality. Transforms your thirsts into what lives — into flesh and blood, or a deathless name, but each as *real*. . . ."

"So if you fail to get to the top. . . .?" Gail groped with an uneasy eagerness, and wistfully.

"I'd lose a life as you did. You told me — about yourself in that hotel. . . . Oh God, my eyes!"

It was Bob's first unrestrained cry, and it cut Gail as with a sharp knife.

VI

Gail strove to master his emotion.

Over his left cheek, the north wall of the tent was bulging, tremulous, in the steady pressure of a rising wind. Somewhere a hollow crunch reverberated, the voice of a falling snow-cornice.

"I'm a different man, now," he murmured to himself. "And yet the same. . . ."

He thought: Is all this truth? Or are our words, and is my insight, distorted by a sorcery in this giddy altitude, by the poison of wasting tissues, by the hovering wings of death?

For he saw! That deed and name were no less very entities than life itself; that they could endure as steadfast as all humanity. . . . It was too much to believe,

all too vast for his dogged bluntness to accept. Indeed, there were countless forms of living after death!

"Look at what every man wants, the world over," went on Bob, bravely. "If he gets it, that's how he reaches any Hereafter that there is. Everyone craves some goal, even if he can't tell you what, or if it's short-lived, short-sighted — beastly. . . ."

Again across Gail's eyes drifted the dock in Seattle, and the grey, stubby man in his vagabondage; then the boy Rex, and Jonesy, with their extraordinary faiths. Only, for a heart-rending space, he could conjure no compelling likeness of his Clara. Did this portend the vanity of Love, or symbolise its yet deeper mystery? He knew! — but from no experience, from no worldly preaching. Life still must hold its blind, inexplicable faiths. . . .

"Yes — yes," responded Gail. "Didn't I tell you that? I came North to find all this out. And now I know . . . so soon. . . ."

It had not taken the lessons of a lifetime to compass this wisdom. He had it, not as a verdict searched for through the multitude, but from one man's lips.

"Some men's work for their goal dies with them," persisted Bob, in his grim monotone. "Because it's selfish, feeble. After some it can live on invisible, for years. That's if it's done for others, in charity — a sacrifice. . . . No one understands mine. . . . But yours — yours is the first passion. Men don't respect it, and least on the frontier. . . ."

"They're throwing life away in this young world — everyone is — the men who work and the thieves they work for," cried Gail. They were speaking again in tense, staccato syllables. Gail's words sounded to him faint, delirious, but he could not check them. An om-

nipotence, yet not that of Bob's quest, was voicing through him, in revelations, all the long wonder of his soul. "They don't see why they're alive, responsible, for the future of us all."

Gusts were whipping the tent, snapping the silk with detonations loud as gun shots. It seemed each minute that they must be swept away.

"Right — right!" exclaimed Bob, with an effort at laughter. "But wouldn't that man who's following think you were the crazy one, to hear us? . . . We're *up*, man. It's only a question of strength and caution now. We're up to the brow of our ridge."

But Gail scarcely heard him. He felt that a great stone had been rolled away from the prison about his being. The mounting surge of the storm had been inspiring music, which had borne him truth, from the malevolent altars of the Alaska of his dreams. And it did not fade into illusion with Bob's bantering exorcism.

"I didn't mean to mock you, Gail," he said. "But it's action we want now. . . . For you're the man I thought you were in the beginning, and more."

He reached out a hand, and Gail felt its corded, bony fingers touch his sharp cheek-bones. He gave them a spasmodic grasp, and rising on an elbow, gazed upon Bob's curled, yellow head resting on his crooked arm, his swollen eyelids quivering ceaselessly, like the wings of a captive moth.

"But there's an obligation," Bob resumed, solemnly again, straining his voice above the tempest, "always for us, who get so close to the heart of life."

Leaning on his braced muscles, Gail waited with a thundering bosom for him to continue.

"I said, there's helping others to their ends —

charity. . . . If your goal is lost — like Jonesy's — you must fight for the next man's guerdon. . . . Throw your strength and soul into it, as you are into mine. And that's charity — more than any religion teaches — because I'm not — suffering." He gave a hollow laugh; then paused. "But if any man blocks you then, or hinders you from your own immortality —" He burst into a choking, stertorous cry, "Kill him — kill him! . . . Don't hesitate — and you shan't ever suffer."

He flung over upon his back, panting, gasping in the thin air, in the poiniarding cold, in the dawning, lucent silver of the low northern moon, which flushed up their frenzied and pallid silk.

"Sleep — now," Bob drawled at length, exhausted.

But Gail could as well have reached the summit of Mt. Lincoln that night as slept.

Bob's aims — his aims. To act, to survive, to love, reasoning for oneself: that summed existence. . . . In the din of snapping silk, the onslaught of shrill gales, the muffled crunching of far snowslides, Gail awaited, fearless, that final blast which would sweep them out through mid-air. He cared not whether it came or not; only, he knew that at its instant, he would fight like a cornered beast to hold the tent around him; fight, as tomorrow he would battle with Bob against his mountain, through crevasse, cornice, avalanche, and with the rage of a creative ardour.

VII

Their snow-glasses, dangling knotted about the tent-pole, miraculously touched Gail's sight as motionless. The gusts had died; only a languid flapping of one seam in the wall persisted.

"Hark!" whispered Bob, springing upright. "That's the fair-weather wind. It's now or never for our trick!"

He faced Gail, with open yet glazed and scarlet eyes; seized the stove.

"But your sight?" Gail beseeched.

"I can see you. Isn't that enough?" he answered, yet with a wince. "Only let me eat."

As they lushed the soup and tea, broke and chewed the hard pemmican, Gail seemed to mark Bob's body tempered in the flame of his will. Packing up, he weighed the pemmican in his hand, peered down the nozzle of the alcohol can.

"Two more boils of alcohol now we've filled the tea-bottle, and four more eats," he reported, "at 14,000 feet. When the sun hits the loose snow on top of the ridge, we can't cover 5,000 feet today, even if the weather holds. One more camp then. The bottle must do for noon and tonight, with a fresh boil for the morning, to take us to the top and down to the cache." He paused abruptly, as though his reason were inhibited; then added in a vague voice, "That'll be on our nerves and guts, I guess, hey, Gail?"

It was half past two o'clock. The billowing whiteness, no longer sheer, swelled north and east toward the summit of the ridge. All the west in that keen yet ghostly light was an ocean of dappled cloud, flat, limitless, upon whose shore they stood—a tapestry shot with threads of rose and violet, likely verging upon some Siberian coast. Thither the ice-falls and cornices at hand plunged under its rumpled floor; but north, it frayed into tongues and filaments, into skeins and skeleton wisps of cloud. Through their gaps they gazed as into ocean deeps, upon a dark and sombre, snowless

land, revealed far beneath, where here a canyon streaked a greyish hair, there a lake or river raised its polished sheen.

The cold stabbed them, but they quickly topped the *bergschrunds*, above all sight of the up-curving earth. Under a glassy crust, the levelling smooth fields lurked heavy and exhausting with waist-deep snow. They plunged into a curdled ice-mist, which draped with impalpable veils the lustre of a sky now windless and quite black. They no longer poked for crevasses. The scant oxygen screwed metallic, torturing bands ever tighter about their foreheads. Panting, feeling that their senseless feet raised a ton from each forward thrust, they took turns at breaking trail through the deep drifts, each collapsing after fifty paces, to let the other pass ahead as he gaped at his ashy-black, contorted features.

Oh, for the sunlight, which it seemed would never strike upward over the bulge of their narrowing realm. They gasped little commonplaces: "Bang your feet together. I've got back the feeling in my right,"—the while sweat poured from their temples. "I can't seem to hold my axe. . . . But we're killing more height than you'd think."

The stringy mists started to stir, to race. Creeping around the ridge, the wind began to cut straight upon their calloused cheeks, to set aflow crackling sheets of a thin, powdery scud into their bowed faces. And then, when hope for it was dead, the sunlight swept them, quite heatless, but with the stab of a million lances into their raw eyes. The seething drift exhaled an icy fire, each particle a flame of frost; the haze flared up, boiling, like lighted powder-grains — and left them ablaze and blind.

"Crest! — crest!" shouted Bob, fumbling on his glasses. "Look, ahead there!"

They crept forward, down, until the soft snow pressed up their arm-pits. They stroked the moisture from their glasses, as all the vacant, coveted universe of the south dawned in a glazy smokiness against them. They beheld as through the large end of a telescope sharp, tiny ranks and ramparts — carved, bluish-ivory emanations — of the coast ranges, blear in the moist haze of the Pacific, which rose behind them in a fluid curtain, a wall of dusky steel.

As they stared, Gail heard a gentle crunch in the snow beside him. He turned. Bob was staggering to his feet again. He leaned forward on his axe, shaking spasmodically, his shoulders heaving. Tears were coursing down his haggard cheeks; they hung there, frozen. He groaned, fell forward, retched and vomited.

"And the rats are at my eyes again," he raged faintly. "Told you — the sickness would come. . . . There's nothing more. The tent —"

Gail felt his heart running to water.

"Wait, you'll be better —" he stammered, shamed at the eager fatuity of his words.

"No — no. When the body's gone —" He raised his lax, trembling arms. "How high's our record? . . . In my pocket — fingers too frozen."

As he dipped into Bob's mackinaw for the aneroid, Gail strove to subdue the flush of pride in his own bodily persistence, which lurked behind his flood of pity and amazement. He studied Bob's features for the truth of his collapse. But looks lie behind snow-glasses.

His frame felt empty, podlike to the touch. Gail read through the film that instantly blurred the warm

dial: 16,200 feet. Bob gurgled in his throat, and, slipping off his pack, fell forward on his face.

Gail, hurling off his own burden, plunged into the work of raising the tent. And when he had unpacked and spread Bob's blankets inside, a desolating awe, more akin to terror than exultation, had withered the guilty shadow of his emulation.

"I'll stay by you," he muttered, lifting Bob to his feet. "Maybe tomorrow —"

Bob tottered under the low flap of the tent.

"There's no tomorrow — with mountain sickness in me, at this height. . . . I know —" he uttered, distinctly.

Another spasm cut off his words. He toppled over, clattering among the dishes.

Gail crowded him down into his blankets, in the quick-gathering warmth of the silk,—that disembodied will and spirit, now sapped of its transfiguring force and fire, lapsed into too mortal flesh.

Spots, some blanched, some hectic, began to show under his livid tan.

VIII

It seemed to Gail that he had been sitting on his blankets beside Bob for hours. In the long rush of his thoughts, all his fears had slowly merged into a great incredulity.

Bob had tired easily from the first. He had grown more pliant the higher they had gotten; his aberrations had become the more inane. He had even mocked at his quest, corroded its inspiration with irony. And yet, his zeal had always burned the more dauntless. Ever more valiantly he had faced and annihilated each crisis. He had humbled Gail before the black precipice, and

then conquered it. In the throes of his snow-blindness he had pierced with a grewsome sanity the riddle of Gail's craving toward the future.

No! A leader and a prophet — he could not surrender!

Bob stirred, writhing his face into the sleeve of his blue mackinaw.

"Go to the top," he whispered tensely. "You're fitter for this thing than I am. As I should be fitter than you for — immortality — your way. It's always — the thing we love — that ruins us. . . ."

"Never!" exploded Gail. He saw Bob's sacrifice as a martyrdom, and tears warmed his eyes. Then Gail viewed him defeated, ignobly yielding, and he chilled with scorn. But beside his listless disdain toward Jonesy, this was mingled ice and fire.

"I asked too much of life," went on Bob, in a querulous whine. "I never deserved — Lincoln. You don't want it, so you can win. You make it — take it." His voice cracked, passionate, delirious. "I told you — about helping others — if we can't win ourselves. . . . F-f-fight for the immortality of others when yours is lost. . . ."

His words set Gail's blood surging. A releasing flame crept through his leashed tendons. His fury of the night past against the defiance of that white, deadly apex above, against all the planetary void below, withered every scruple. The world's laws of action, justice, right and wrong, could not penetrate into this outer space. . . .

Gail felt as if he were waking from a long sleep. The minutes of life, the instant for undying deeds, were racing past him, never to return. . . . The wind had died. The surges of drifting ice-powder had dropped

into the stillness of death. It was very hot in there. . . . Gail found himself with set eyes and open mouth close over Bob, who slept now, breathing easily, his elbow, as always, crooked about his head.

He snatched up the vacuum bottle. He had made no sound, yet,

"Go on, Gabriel, go on," muttered Bob's voice. "Come back and tell me —"

Gail was outside the tent, his pack on his back.

All around him in the blare of noon, there rippled long, flail-like shadows — the revolving spokes of huge, twin wheels.

The strawberry fields. 'Again he was going to the city and his son, deserting a life in the balance to win his own life's worth. He had gone forth then, into a blighted world, without regret. Now he was robbing another of his perpetuity — with gratitude.

CHAPTER IX

FULFILMENT

I

It was the moon, or the planet Mars, that he traversed. Yet to right and left loomed earthly shadows. Now under the one a troop of dwarfed alps ploughed through veils of pinkish haze; now curtains that stiffened instantly into black perpendiculars of rock, crusting themselves with frosty traceries, descended into the other; then, in creeping, milky veins, quivering as if seen through isinglass, swam the tiny convolutions of flat glaciers, rising to overwhelm him. They made a sound like distant surf, which became the granular crunch-crunch of his arms slumping into the upright crust.

Gail wondered once why his eyes were less acute than his ears. The boring pain had fled from his temples. He rather craved it; its absence was somehow ominous. He lifted his glasses; but seeing neither better nor worse so, let them fall again. And he was worried that all his muscles and his stomach felt so fit; he would have preferred an ache somewhere. Gasping, panting, he yet had a sense of buoyancy. He rested every twenty paces. He was counting them.

He took out his watch. Time, up to that moment, had been the figment of a vanished world. It was three o'clock. From Bob at 16,200 feet, he had had 2,900 odd to go. It was impossible in that thin air; still, his mind was very clear.

He, who in all his life had never fought; who had ever cowered in the face of its assaults; who, until that moment on the strawberry fields when he had learned that his flesh and blood had so vicariously persisted, had never stirred a corner of his soul to slake that great and simple thirst for perpetuity which marked him from his fellows — now shook with a vindictive valour, as a trapped animal clawing from the steel, to win this stranger's arbitrary goal. It was no obligation of honour, or loyalty, or brotherhood that drove him upward through that cold of outer space. It was a thing far brighter, stronger, at the springs of life. He — he — did not know what it was. Only there burned across his mind, in letters that seemed the logic of all his speculations and the verdict of his doubts:

“Fight for the immortality of others!”

For Life, which had so malignly tricked him; for Nature, who had made him in the image of her faith — promised all, fulfilled nothing, struck him in the face — was this the ritual of vengeance, or the creed of a salvation?

II

Struggling yet borne along upon a resistless current, exhausted yet soothed, he flung against a sudden steepness. And the ridge was narrowing to a knife-edge. All underfoot slithered away, down and outward at each touch of his feet, although he raised and trod them lightly as an insect. Without or within his head — no matter — he beheld two dark amphitheatres, as of a hollow cylinder halved, and its twin curves turned back to back, pinching his white path, melting it like tallow. Fear, a creeping thing, shivered through the skin above his ears. Then rock scarred his hands, and

he was scrambling up some lone spire, from which he would gaze across, through all the suns of space, up to the summit miles above.

Those were cornices ahead! Wavered their countless, overhanging scrolls. He saw them growing, one upon another, out of that sheer wall — delicate, curved eaves, fragile shelves, created but to disintegrate at his touch. They were twisted, rank, waxen yet filmy lips. They were parasitic, deadly, monstrous. And he was crawling toward them, straddling a swinging ridge-pole, pursued as in a dream.

They fell about in stifling, powdery clouds as he plunged among them. Their snow seeped down his neck and burnt him, yet the sweat dropped from his brow in globes of ice. That fear, and his sense of balance, which he knew must be kept poles apart were he to hold his grip upon existence, mingled into one alloyed stream. He could not tell if he were boosting up or downward, so sank upon his back and closed his eyes, to let that superhuman power which impelled him onward decide the issue.

Then — he was lying on his face, his toes digging back and forth across coarse, granular snow. He was above the cornices! And instantly the blinding letters swept again across his brain:

“But if any man block yours — kill him — kill him!”

Could that be the saving watchword for the Youngest World?

III

His eyelids opened to a black sky. Far over a smooth, sagging waste, he beheld a turreted mound, crowned by a dome. Its crest was a thick, out-thrust

lip of greenish ice, draped with gigantic stalactites. It was all a hideous face, severed from its body through the jaw, just at the moment of speaking, and planted there, upside-down. Below, plastered with glistening webs, stretched a transverse band of wine-hued cliff; and under, dull, grisly bosses — the lustrous facets seen from their first camp on the ice. . . .

It was the cap of liberty, the final peak!

He whipped out the aneroid, dangling at the end of its whang-leather. He read: 18,200 feet. His heart leaped. He had come 2,000; had 900 more, then. Or did that decapitation leer 90 — or 9 — at him? Yet he knew that threading its features, he must hack every step.

He was at the base of the image. He dragged the point-end of his axe across it with a rasp which set heat crackling within his head. He raised the blade and dealt a blow. It sounded like a pistol volley. The hoops of steel that long ago had dropped from his forehead were clapped around it, drawn tighter, tighter, in a rumbling vise. The letters dimming across his brain blew up into a pyre, until the inky arch of heaven boiled with flame. A muscular wave swept up from the pit of his stomach, gagged him, forced out his tongue. He collapsed forward, vomiting.

A succumbing lassitude had seized him. He wanted sleep — to sleep. A darkling film spread across the fiery sky; but through it danced incandescent specks, lacerating his eye-balls with keen needles. These whirled, as in a kaleidoscope, with the hum of a wheel revolving into invisibility, which wound ever tighter the screw of torture. That unseen engine caught him up, curved and rigid, planted him upon his feet. A berserker rage possessed him. With oaths and a bitter

cry, he raised and swung his axe into the face of ice. It bit in, silent, as if the slope were dough. He felt his right foot press into a soft pocket.

He would have sworn that he was entering a forest swale. White flowers covered ponds ringed by long slue-grass. The distant, haunting clang of horse-bells floated from dead spruces. Then he was swaying in the top of a tall cottonwood by a foam-flecked river. He smelt wood-smoke. He was motionless, as the world revolved on independent of him. He laughed. He was like the ivory ball of a roulette wheel, flying against revolutions. He was back in his father's green-baize place. So, he was about to review life. Well — the crevasse had told him that he could not be going to die, then.

IV

Soft large flakes, big as goose-feathers, were falling all around, through a stagnant warmth.

Light crashed through his skull, easing the festering pressure there. He was stretched on his back, with arms extended. The cold flushed down through every vein and nerve, like water poured upon burning sand. And the steam that exhaled from him clouded all overhead. He awoke, breathing desperately, into a pearly gloom. He withdrew his fingers from the moulds that they had dug in the ice, leaned upright, glared at them. They were stiff with frosted blood. His whole mackinaw was burred over by a long thatch of feathery crystals.

He found himself treasuring that sense of gain deep within his being which had marked his waking on yesterday's final cornice. He felt the joy of having pushed below him bubbles that were peopled spheres.

And ending at his feet, he saw cut steps, little hacks in the bluish ice, slanting downward from two ruffs of crumbling rock.

The flakes ceased falling. He was back in the world again. From his quilt of ice, he could look off all around the compass. Long haunches, buttressing ridges, each curved beneath through air that glimmered as he thought the deeps of the ocean might. And though he felt no wind, there pulsed and vanished from one crouching brow, as from the crater of a volcano, ghost-white and streaming sheets of cloud.

The earth circled him, a bowl of shadows; now like glistening jade, now softening, as if drenched with rains that had just ceased. Then his strengthening eyes discerned faint lines of light: wires, coiled and angular — streams belike — that cut it with threads which throbbed like wind-blown embers. Higher, higher, these crept toward the nether horizons, in patterns mounting repeated, reversed, as mirages; and from the marges of every filament glimmered sapphire and emerald. Thin, rending planes of a ruddy mist, diaphanous as shadows undersea, leaped from rim to rim of the vast concave. It brimmed with waves of smothered gold and indigo; in the bands of phantom rainbows; with a shimmer of rose, cerulean, and the green of summer seas. These fell, dissolving, upon hosts of alps, bold and reticulate, clean and naked as if momentarily created; thrust up empurpled, phosphorescent, through light that waxed as it expired. And in the North burst the fire as of innumerable windows, blazing in the splendid palaces of unseen mountains. Then twilight; and down through the infinite miles was no land, no snow, no rock in all the world as high as he, He was at the summit of Mt. Lincoln,

He knew that he was there because his soul told him so. His soul was hushed in an overmastering calm, victorious.

He knew the truth of life. One voice had reasoned and proclaimed; but the debt of his wisdom was to the multitude. There was one responsibility—to the race's future. That was the burden of all living. And its faith was: Charity,—or kill!

v

He sprang to his feet, gave one prolonged shout, and grabbed out his watch. It was ten o'clock at night. "Bob—Oh you, Bob—Bob!" he shouted. He waited intent, open-mouthed for an instant, in a silly delusion that he might get an answer, or at least an echo; and began to laugh again.

Then, piercing his intoxication, all the scoriated fibres of his nerves and muscles exacted their bodily toll. Cold shrivelled him; excruciating fetters clamped his eyes and temples; he ached with sudden thirst and hunger. He had felt that he was treading upon air, because his feet were frozen. He dumped his pack out, unscrewed the bottle, gulped at it, gnawed pemmican, saw, with but faint regret, that he had no instruments nor the camera. But knotted in a sock was a tin tube with a film in it. On this he scratched Bob's name with the handle of his knife. It could not rust in that airless cold, he told himself, and thoughtless of his own name, heaved over upon it one of the ruffs of crumbling rock.

For, what had he attained? Another's immortality. A name. And what was that? A living name for having done a foolish thing—that was heroic? A great thing—that was so easy? All his exultation

ebbed away. An emptiness spread within his bosom. He looked up. The world below had dropped deep into a beckoning darkness, deluged with the sleep and rest he craved. Those near haunches sprang out ashen; he seemed to hear their cloudy banners murmuring.

He stumbled toward the ladder of hacked steps. His certainty of having been upon the summit evaporated. . . .

He was sliding fast downward, his back to the slope, his heels thumping into carved hollows. He saw lights, which he knew were unreal, spring out in the black cave of the world. All around spread peopled cities, and he heard the hum of traffic in their streets. Then he felt the illimitable gloom of forests rushing upward, saw the star-lit gleam of rivers; will-o'-the-wisps flashed across them; pale emanations arose — smoke from the camp-fires of men. And close above, the sky flung its minute and incandescent welter of creation.

Living presences swept past him. They whispered of human fellowship, of the voids in men's souls, and the bridges that the thoughts of friends cast toward one another. And one image became very clear: Bob — so inspired and defeated — that gaunt figure lying in his blankets, an arm crooked about his head. He was the friend. . . .

Down, down through the grey lunar spaces; into the broken chaos of the cornices. Craftily he spotted his old foot-tracks, now drifted full of snow. Gusts began to sigh about him. He was crawling on his stomach across the swinging knife-edge, between the cylinders of darkness.

A nebulous soft light pervaded the fields. The snow cast out violet shadows; its hollows bubbled with them,

Southwest, over the dim shroud of the Pacific, dawned a red-gold streak, broadening into the sickle of the moon.

The tent was there before him, flapping, lurching, in the rising wind. It looked animate, drunken; it had a repellent lure, as if it had stood there, for years, deserted.

Gail stopped. "Bob — Bob!" he called.

No answer. He plunged through the flap.

VI

He still was lying on his stomach, but the head had slipped from its elbow, and was craned forward, upward. Gail touched his curled, shining hair. It felt brittle, and seemed to crumble under his palms.

The other arm reached across the blanket, resting on the empty can of alcohol among the dishes. All over his blankets grew the long, needle-like rime, like mildew.

Wildly, with a breaking heart, Gail heaved over that iron body upon its back. Bob had never looked so young, so boyish, callow. But his parted lips were puffy, scalded with snow-sores, streaming with frozen matter. And Gail's eyes shrank from the parchment drawn so tight across his high, wrinkled forehead; from the withered, crumpled skin of his sharp chin, the frost-encrusted eyelashes, like two white arcs in the blue-black gouges of their sockets.

Had he no tears? — he asked himself. He fell, with a gorge of anger, upon that cold and stony forehead.

It was not the blighting, desolating fury of his grief in the lodging-house; nor did sorrow transfigure it with any tenderness or sentiment. Gail had never had a friend before, and his new-discovered world of fellow-

ship was born in sacrifice and vengeance; embraced no single being, but mankind.

Death! And Bob had failed, as he had failed. Bob had died for a dream like his own. And failure was the rule of life, else all were gods. Yet Bob had transfigured life for him; made him, the dominant yet helpless, humble; the cowardly and ignorant — brave, wise, compassionate. He was the friend — and prophet. Gail felt the rage with which, were Nature never to requite his thirst, he, too, would pass this threshold.

Furiously he beat his axe against the tent-pole, broke it; tore the clinging fabric from his head, wound it around Bob until he had hidden the last inch of his body; left him, without a backward glance, in the sepulchre he would have chosen.

The body! The body was first in life, clean or defiled, in the grip of whatsoever aim. . . .

Axe in hand, he paused where the faint thread of their tracks curved under, out of sight. He touched the chunk of pemmican and the half-empty bottle in his pack, and started down into the somnolent fogs of the world and day.

A pure, auroral light arched through the North. The laggard sun was rising smothered across whitish bars of cloud. Suddenly a dazzling oval faced him in the western sky: a great sun-dog, circling at the centre of its pale, crossed shafts, a ghostly image of the orb.

Gail raised the cross-headed axe to salute this glory; and instantly, out of its glow, a hand seemed to seize his free arm, to pull him gently forward, downward. Once before he had felt that soft, firm touch: he reeled. It was *her* hand. More clearly than when his brain

had been blazoned with flaming letters, he knew the truth—that Clara had led him onward from this hallowed spot to the summit, anguished, raging; had planted in his veins the ichor of victories.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER X

THE DRY-FARMERS

I

A PACK-TRAIN emerged upon the silt and boulders of the Chyta River flat. The fifteen horses scattered, paused; warily, with lowered heads, they nosed the muddy thread of glacier water bursting from the hidden heart of the range. Then five men appeared, pushing through the yellowing willows that were banked against the slim and black spruce forest. All carried long sticks, and walked as if very tired. Their blue jumpers and flannel shirts were faded and patched; their wide, brown hat-brims sagging and torn; their long boots polished grey by the brush. Hallooing at the horses, each made for the beasts which he habitually unpacked; and when every load — chiefly picks and tools and all-but-empty sacks — had been piled with its saw-buck saddle, covered with its square of tattered canvas, the five heeled off the cayuses up the sand-bar.

A sixth man now took shape through the willows, loping fast but stiffly. He was a short, stocky bull-necked being with quite white hair that was circled by the crownless brim of a black felt hat. His drooping left shoulder seemed to steer him in a curve, which he checked only when at the river's brink. There he

dropped under a big granite boulder, and hunching his knees up under his chin, stared downstream, intent and silent.

Four of the others, of whom none had betrayed any notice of the last, made back toward the timber with dunnage and axes, the tent and grub-box, and there pitched camp. But the fifth, a large-legged youth with freckled, untanned cheeks, moist light blue eyes, and a shock of rusty hair, remained fumbling in a gunny sack. At length he drew from it a box of cartridges, then, its tempered steel gleaming dully, an automatic revolver. He walked over to the camp-fire where John Hartline, head of the Chyta Exploration Company, was helping McConighy, the red-nosed, shriveled little cook, set the reflector-full of sour dough before the flames.

"How's shooting the rust from this iron tonight?" he drawled to Hartline. "We're carrying a dead weight of extra cartridges, with our home cache full. The horses is weak enough from frozen grass, and they'll get nothing but peavine here."

"No more 'n a dozen, then, Luke," boomed Hartline in his gruff, kindly voice. "And watch out for Jones." He nodded toward the white rock.

He was a huge, black-looking man, with broad shoulders and the square mat of a beard that framed hard features burned to a glossy rawness by snow and sun. Rectangular lines criscrossed his thick neck like those of latitude and longitude on a chart. But his bushy brows sheltered eyes that were grey and gentle. He smoked a short clay pipe.

"Mark me, we'll need every one o' them ca'tridges, coming out to Torlina," objected "Daddy" Mease, in his fluty, old man's voice. Over by his dunnage bag, he was fitting on a pair of canvas mits in which to chop

spruce boughs for his bed. He was stout and sallow, despite the rigours of the trail, and a thin beard covered his jowls like moss. "Lamar and his grabbers is squattin' harder on our location, and better armed than we think for. You ain't all had the dealings with the hound as I have."

"What did we send our boys ahead for, but to stand by our ammunition?" put in Tom Guiteau. "Lamar can't touch it with them there, and didn't I pack enough in last winter to blow him out to the coast?"

"And Tom says the Marshal's with us," added Luke Sanborn simply. "Come on yourself, Dad. I bet you can't hit your old brown mare at forty yards," he challenged with a wink at Tom; but Mease did not budge.

"Blackwood — that lyin' U. S. Marshal?" he whined in scorn. "Lamar'll have him bought off by now. They both come of that same Seattle gang."

"Supper, boys," interposed Hartline, checking the nightly argument upon the contest awaiting their arrival at Atna River. McConighy, with the abrupt impatience of the trail cook, switched out the bean-pot upon the tarpaulin, remarking dryly, "Strawberries! An' pinch off the snappers."

Hands clattered the dishes in the grub-box. Plates were heaped, cups filled, chunks of the steaming bread pried loose; and all fell to eating stomach-down on the crisp whitish moss — except Guiteau. Tom, carrying a supper, headed toward the granite rock and Jonesy by the river. Returning empty-handed, he helped himself and joined the others. He was a dark youngster, still in his 'teens, although he looked older than Luke, who was twenty-one. Above a moleskin shirt, he had a high, thin-boned forehead, and cheeks hollow as clamshells. A curved, sharp nose, and lines at the corners

of his eyes that seemed to have been cut with a gouge, gave him a hawk-like aspect. He wore russet boots that reached above his knees and a red bandanna tied about his neck.

"Our friend hearing his horse-bells and rattlin' hobbles tonight?" asked Mease. But before Tom could answer, McConighy advised, "You'd think he and that Valdez spook had killed horses enough as partners from '98 down to start a glue outfit."

Since a month ago, when Jonesy had tumbled into Hartline's camp, his clothes in shreds, his body a corrugation of mosquito bites, he had withdrawn each evening to some commanding spot, there to peer about solemnly for the "glacier demon" which he swore had lured his horses into crevasses. His mind had seemed gone. Beyond that he had been packing for two "mountain-climbing dudes," and had "quit them safe enough," the outfit could learn nothing from Jonesy. They accepted him as an old-timer driven harmlessly insane by the harsh wear of the North. Yet certain traits, as the appealing glitter that fired his wild eyes, equally at hearing Luke talk of his sisters or while roping out a mired horse, had moved Hartline and Tom to the unspoken idea of a strong man's past pathetically wrecked in him.

As Hartline and Mease started to raise the tent, Luke and Tom, with the revolver and cartridges, made for Jonesy's post. Arrived there, they leaned out over the rock, oblivious of him as he was of them. Tom drew a bead on the charred face of a big cottonwood stump at the edge of the willows.

"Best two out of three in turn, Luke," he said. "That'll make two rounds each to the dozen."

He squinted, steadying his hand. Three reports

blared out. Tom handed the pistol to Luke, as the echoes ravaged the treeless ridges.

"Which mark do you mean?" blinked Luke. He had the wide-set, docile, almost bovine features of the farm-boy. Not even the grind of Alaska had sharpened his sluggish mind, or sophisticated his innocence. "The big white stump to the left," he asked, "or that brown log half hid in them willows?"

"The' ain't but one I see," began Tom; then checked himself. "Hello," he added, "that other's one of our packs. Old Mease slings them anywheres about."

"Yes. The one he's pointing at," said Luke, indicating Jonesy. "Look at him. He ain't never done that before toward his demon."

Over the boulder, they saw Jonesy's right arm, extended straight and rigid at the brown thing.

"And — and — she's moving," whispered Luke.

Tom's thin, aquiline cheeks and square jaw flushed. But it was Jonesy's pitiable glance, turned on them as he sprang to his feet with a guttural cry, that held them dumb. His heavy features, wasted and crinkled into a mask, his dull eyes swollen in their sunken sockets, leaped out a-flame. He knocked the gun from Luke's hands. It clattered down across the rock.

"It's him — *him*," he screeched, plunging forward toward the bundle in the willows, "that was going to eat my buck!"

The rhythmic hacking of Mease's axe ceased abruptly. Distinctly through the lucent air came Hartline's voice, "Spotted his ghost, eh?" Then, resounding, "*Hold on there!*" Everyone was running after Jonesy.

They held off awed, as if under some spell that com-

munion between the demented man and that limp human bundle, prone there in the evening glow, were an ordained rite. The body lay huddled on its face. They gazed, hushed, at Jonesy's corded hands passing eagerly from its mop of matted and bleached hair — hair shot with not a few white threads — down across its frayed and rotted khaki. Meanwhile it stirred.

"Alive, boys," issued in an in-drawn whistle from Jonesy's throat, yet more clearly than they had ever heard him speak; and a vein that rooted into the scar at his throat swelled purple.

The harsh brawl of the river, pounding a bed that reverberated as if it were cast metal, rang through their ears. The sharp, surrounding terra-cotta peaks raised their clean, theatric slopes above the black javelins of the spruces into a lustrous, icy twilight. In that keen, expectant air of the northern autumn, with its portentous avowal of the emptiness of Nature's heart toward human death and life alike, it seemed that the buzz of a fly might echo from the ends of the earth.

Then Hartline stepped forward with a heave of his great shoulders, and shoving Jonesy aside, gathered Gail gently into his arms, and bore him toward the exaggerated brightness of the camp-fire.

II

The faces ringed about him, lying on the tarpaulin, were stamped by the wisdom, or graven by experience into living mirrors, of that agony to which Gail had long been oblivious. Tom shoved the tea-pot into the ashes, as their eyes swept up from his swollen feet wrapped in sacking crusted with blood — from the skeleton tendons of his legs and the lumps of his knees where his trousers ended in a ravelled fringe — up

through the pulp of his shirt, under which his sunken ribs gleamed blue and waxy, to the scraggly beard over the great, shrivelled bulb of his Adam's apple.

"Is it a Siwash?" gaped Luke, at Gail's pointed cheek-bones, their enduring ruddiness tipped with purple blotches; at his whitish eyebrows slanting up and outward from the dire rings and hollows of his closed sockets.

Hartline seized the now singing pot, and tipped the nozzle to Gail's dry-cracked mouth. Tom lifted the head upon his knees. Its long upper lip doubled, sliding upward, and Gail swallowed. The others took a step back, as if awaiting some upheaval. A shudder shook him; he coughed, and the flabby lids lifted from the bloodshot caverns where his dark eyes smouldered. His gaunt cheeks twitched grossly.

"We almost shot you, pardner," Tom tenderly broke the hush.

"He ain't the chief dude," muttered Jonesy, but with a grip on himself which again startled the crowd. "He's the one was a flunky."

Gail's haggard sight veered upon him. "I — never — had to — eat your buckskin," he rasped, throatily, from the pit of his stomach. "That last ptarmigan I shot was big like an ostrich." His eyes caught the company, kindled, and he lurched his body forward from Tom's knees. "Who — who are you?" he stuttered, louder and more firmly. "Who d'you work for? I'm Gabriel Thain. And I quit him like a dog and made the summit. I got another man's immortal —"

Hartline stifled his words with the spout of the teapot, and pressed a spoonful of the beans he had been mashing in a cup between Gail's teeth.

"Work for ourselves," said Tom doggedly. "And for the country."

"Hartline? You're not Hartline? Oh — oh God!" His voice mounted shrill and faint with joy. He flung out his arms.

The tension broke. A chuckle of relief, beginning with old Mease, ran through the outfit. They pushed forward, seized Gail by the hands, and Jonesy, open-mouthed, dealt him a thump upon the back.

"We heard of you and that mountain-climber," began Hartline gravely. "We was at our development work up the creek when you went by."

"Yes, where's your rich pardner Bob?" suddenly broke out Jonesy, with excited accusation. "Thain — of course. But you got to account for Snowden."

"Choke him off," broke in Tom. But a glance from Hartline had cowed Jonesy instantly, and he lapsed into his usual maundering complacency.

Gail trembled, and his glance fell. Then, with an effort, he extended his skeleton hands for the tea-pot. Grasped between calloused palms, he lifted it to his lips, tilted back his head, took a long draught. His raised eyes under half-closed lids swept the dumb men before him with a kind of furtive defiance. Then he reached for the beans, and began quickly eating them, wolfing them, until, satisfied, he dropped the cup on the tarpaulin. His saviours were recalling the outlines of past, obscure tragedies between partners lost in the northern wastes, and there was suspicion in their faces.

With an effort Gail moistened his lips. "Dead — Bob's dead," he said with his first huskiness. "I'll tell you — don't judge me — yet." He fixed Hartline with a blazing look. "I'm sleepy — for real sleep now," he murmured.

"Tom!" boomed Hartline. "You get my blankets ready for him. And turn in now, all the rest of you!"

Without a word, but with backward glances, the others obeyed, following Guiteau toward the tent. Eased of his confession, Gail's head at once fell forward and his eyes closed. Hartline filled the dishpan from the bucket, and when the water was hot, unbound the sacking from Gail's feet and began to bathe them.

III

Hartline dominated his companions greatly by his reserves in speech. At daylight, when McConighy's shout awoke the tent, the stranger stood outside, booted and dressed in John's buckskin suit, shaving by the campfire. John was pacing beside him, hands behind his back, black beard pressed upon his chest. The outfit knew then that Thain's mystery would not be revealed until Hartline saw fit, and then to all impartially.

They ate in silence, rounded up the horses, fell to the long routine of packing. Hartline shifted the rose-pinto's load, which held the gun to which Gail owed his rescue, to Mease's brown mare; and as the train gathered to plough through the river, shrunk by the early September cold, he threw an empty sack across the pinto's saw-buck and lifted Gail upon it. In the timber beyond, John seized that horse's halter, as Tom and the rest took their places in the line behind, and led the sixth day's grind of their three weeks' hike out to Atna River, their main cache, and the disputed town-site called Torlina.

Gail's daze from starvation and the poison of fatigue merged slowly into the numbness of physical well-being. But his mind, still clouded, overcome both by gratitude toward these men and anxiety over how they would

receive his story of Bob's death, struggled vainly for speech, to which Hartline gave no encouragement. The dry trail rose from dense spruces across mossy uplands, brown in the cool sunlight, free of mosquitoes. The ease of travel now! It seemed years since he had fought along that same course, through the drizzle, mud-holes, and stinging insect torture of a hateful wilderness. He began to recognise points: the aspen scarp where Jonesy's bald-faced mare had cut a swath through two hundred feet of timber, landing with her feet up in the creek at the bottom, but her pack not even shifted. And then it struck him — last proof that he was no longer clutching under-cut black cliffs and the lips of crevasses, or crawling faint yet gorged with sour blueberries across the crazing tundra — that back where he had heard the reviving rip of bullets was the river in which his horse had turned turtle and he had been nearly drowned.

Hour after hour they travelled, not halting at noon. They dipped into timber again, and met Kulana Creek. In the saffron cottonwoods across it, Gail heard a patter of feet behind him, and turning, saw Jonesy dodging up the swaying line of packs.

"You ain't spoke about my daughter, hev you?" he whispered breathlessly. "Don't, Gail!"

"No, Jonesy," Gail shook his head. He recalled that throughout breakfast the poor man had slunk about, shooting him uneasy glances, as if in warning or remorse. Gail did not remember his truculent outburst of the night before. But Hartline did. He turned to see Jonesy seize Gail by the hand, mutter, "I'll stand by you!" and plunged back into the brush.

"Jonesy, you call him," said Hartline slowly, facing forward. "Why didn't we ever think of that?" he

asked, as of himself. "He trusts you, don't he?" he questioned after a pause. . . . "The truth is often plain to lunatics. That man's feelings is right. We've come to like him. And you've started bringing out the sense in him. We couldn't."

Gail tried to answer but failed, his heart was filling so.

"You've heard of this outfit, most likely — Gail," he went on, with quiet gruffness. "Most Alaska has. We're the dry-farmers from Kingdom, Idaho, that won't lay down to Lamar and his Wall Street crowd. And you thought we might be working for someone." He laughed a big, soft laugh. "We're fighting, man."

"Did I say that?" Gail managed to wonder aloud.

"Whatever you are," went on John, "this coming fortnight you can't help but get to know us. I b'lieve your record's good; but if it ain't, you might make things go hard for us in the tussle we have on. We can't afford to have you for anything but a friend, so I'm going to show you my cards before I ask for yours."

"All along, I've been looking forward to this crowd — John," Gail stammered.

"The rest of us is at our station on the high bank this side of the Atna," he continued, regardless. "Torlina's the old Siwash hang-out across it. I kept the two youngsters, the best of them, and old Mease with me. . . . Talk of a round peg in a square hole. . . ."

He told in abrupt and vigorous detail how Mease, a school-teacher at home in Kingdom, at the age of fifty had taken a flyer in a shrimp outfit. He went out to Klamath, Oregon, to build a cannery that was to be the biggest in the world, he had thought, a monument to his children's children. "And Mease'll tell you how

it was the Seattle end of this same Lamar crowd that froze him out, sent him broke, and back to us to hoof this godforsaken hell at his age," he added. "Well, maybe. It might help to have him think so. But barring that he kicks like a hawg-tied calf if Mac don't brown his pancakes, it's a miracle how some round pegs will fit."

Ten years with the roughest necks in Alaska could not make Luke Sanborn take a drink, or quit blushing at cuss words. But he would sink to savagery after a fortnight alone with Siwashes. A throw-back; he had their improvident ways and animal nose for game trails; could keep his direction in blizzards on a glacier, track horses across bare rock, which is beyond any Indian. His father was the post-master back home. "And Luke's the mommer's boy he looks," said John. "Our first day out he lost the gun belongs to that arsenal in the belt about his waist. But he still hangs to it. That's Luke. Too young yet to know what he wants out of life — beyond killing a moose — but when he hits on it, you stand from under."

There was McConighy, whose silky hair, frail bulging forehead and bad teeth, reminded Gail of Occidental Avenue; but he only rented bicycles and played the trombone at home, while now his job cooking inhibited his locally famed wit,—“like the devil must be choking off Bob Ingersoll,” he added with dry satisfaction. And Gail, listening, saw the sympathy that lurked behind John's roughness, perceived a tenderness beneath his brutality. He felt his own cheeks flush at hints that brought the aims of these pioneers into the now wider horizons of his insight into the basic desires of mankind, derived from his dead partner and their privations.

"Then Tom Guiteau," said John. "The best rustler in Alaska, but the only man in the outfit I don't trust to the limit, say what you will for his seeming kind heart. It's black at bottom, I b'lieve."

He was the only one not from Kingdom. Hartline had picked him up on the Seattle docks. He was drumming to a publishing house, selling sets of Shakespeare to "square-heads" in lumber camps who couldn't read a word of English. That took smartness, and he had it. Last winter he had freighted grub and arms in to Torlina, and had been on the trail for a month with Blackwood, the U. S. Marshal. "The boy's got a grudge against the world," asserted John, spitting violently, as he kicked a windfall from the trail. "He won't much care whose claims he'd salt, so long as he could make the get-away. He's a foundling, illegitimate, and separated from his wife. Likely that's blighted him. He knew most things too young, and now don't believe in none."

But Gail's heart, perversely, had quickly leaped toward Tom, whom he discerned was feared, even by this dominant man, quite as much as he was mistrusted. And in the ensuing silence, to the crackling of hoofs upon twigs, and the scrunch-scrunch of Hartline's strong legs in their coarse denim, the warring warmth and bitterness which he had seen flash in Tom's yellow eyes, absorbed Gail, naturally.

IV

Four years ago, the boys from Kingdom had "home-steaded" Torlina, receiving their papers therefor. Then Lamar's "yeller-legs"—mining experts, that you wouldn't trust with four bits—had overrun the country. He had bonded, then bought, every copper

claim in it, except the dry-farmers'. He had paid the locators, whose dreams had become ashes after years of packing in from the coast to work "development," in return tickets to Seattle. "Then Lamar gets a railroad right of way up the Atna from the coast. On the jump Washington withdraws both banks of the river in a forest reserve, and the day his surveyors pull into Torlina and we're up on our claims, they're thrown open to location by executive order and without notice. They jump our stakes, because they have to have the townsite. It's the only place where a grade can turn off from the Atna to reach these valleys. All the rest of the country is peaks and glaciers on end; and if the Rio Tinto, when them Phoenicians first struck her, was in here — which it is and richer according to all experts" (this without any slur toward yellow-legs) "it might be so much tailings if you didn't own Torlina."

"We get notice our homestead deeds is void," growled on John. "Void, man! When that land's ours by the first rights of men in any territory, by all the law our country was pioneered and won under. And this spring we find Lamar planted there with his clerks and toadies, backed by all Wall Street and the Department of the Interior!"

Gail stiffened with such a loathing of injustice as he had never felt in his life, anywhere, before.

"Ain't the Government our policeman to guard this country for us that was the first to give our life and strength to it?" John demanded fiercely. "Then why is this same policeman robbing us? Handing over this rich land, from the people it belongs to, to them that never lifted a finger for it until they saw the wealth that we uncovered, but have the bribe money to get and

squeeze it dry like the salmon canners have the coast?" His voice resounded, quavering. He broke off, puffing from the intensity of his feelings; then: "And why do we hang on? Because a fight ain't so foreign to our blood in the West where we was raised. But most because more than our just rights rest on this business — the future of all Alaska, of this last whiteman's country — whether it's to go to them that have froze and starved to get their bread from it, or to the wolverine and jackals that make slaves of the *men* in this last young world."

He paused, continuing gently, in an altered voice, "We don't ask much. Independants made us any number of fair offers for our property until Lamar come in. We only want an interest in the working of it, a stake to draw on, to give our youngsters a better chance in life than we had. Enough money to hand them the education we went without, and the food which means the strength of their children, and of our country and its people to come. That's the only Hereafter I believe in. That's all in the world that living's for, I reckon."

"Great heaven — I'm with you!" broke out Gail. A tightness gripped about his chest, and his blood surged hot. "You see. You understand."

"Take the home town, Kingdom, that we're from," his tone sank at the confidence. "Every man-jack there chipped into this outfit. Mortgaged his ranch. And they're all good people, though the soil never panned out to what the railroads that promoted it promised. There was red fire and speeches when we left there four years back, to come home rich in ten months. And we've been writing to stand off wives and

mothers ever since. And they starve without we keep our promise. But we can't write 'rich' no more. Four years. . . ."

He paused to light his clay stub, and for an hour more Gail watched over the pinto's flop ears John's big shoulders rolling, as he digressed upon Seattle, Alaska, and the braced, sordid game of successful pioneering in these days. He appeared to hug no illusions; to face the issue culminating in his hands, now from his own broad, relentless view-point, now from Luke's, or Dad's; even from his enemy, Lamar's.

"So this month the case is coming out of the district court at Valdez," he ended. "Blackwood 'll be hiking to Torlina with the decision — with the papers for us, or Lamar, to sign and take possession. You can guess from what I've told you, and how we're outfitted, the bets we'd make on that judgment. Lamar's got the ground now, and there was gun-play between his same outfit, if you remember, and those coal boys on the coast over harbour rights last year. Blackwood was the Marshal there, too."

They had reached a withered meadow, between a black slope patched fantastically with last winter's snow, and a grove of reddening aspens. The sky was clear as glare ice, yet a vague, refractive mistiness, a film of sea-green and faint violet suffused its paleness.

"Camp here," said Hartline, halting in the stunted willows of the trickle from a snow-bank. Gail leaped down, and as the weary pack-train jingled in, helped Tom and the rest uncinch.

"Now you know the strike of our lode," said John to Gail. "After supper you show us the lead of yours, and of your pardner Snowden's."

V

By the time that Gail's story had reached the point of finding Bob dead in the tent, he was secure in his confidence that the outfit had received it with a searching sympathy and fairness. They had been just, beyond his most eager hopes.

"Hold — at that," interrupted Hartline. "Judging how we found you, we can figure your trip to here at the miracle it was."

The sudden silence, checking Gail's monotonous, avowedly colorless recital, was intense yet unconstrained.

"When this gits into the papers," Mease broke it, "you'll have quite a name as a mountain-climber, boy?"

Gail, panting, feeling that the weight of worlds had been lifted from his being, gave an exasperated grunt. He was elated, defiant, flushed by this first review of his body's triumph, by his secret checking of the bearing of every grim word and detail upon his life's widening scope. Luke, who had been burning a birch-wood fungus, "freshening" his last quid of tobacco in its ashes, Siwash-wise, looked up at Gail with an excited chuckle of wonder and admiration. The others remained staring before them through the clear darkness. The camp-fire shaded and accentuated the features peculiar to each.

"Straight and dry, like a Geological Survey report, ain't it?" said John at last, into the bowl of his du-deen. "We've all been snow-blind and some of us down crevasses, and have lugged helpless men —" Gail noted his sudden break-off with the reference to Bob.

"I don't see why you quit him, even at his orders,"

began Tom. "He was out of his head. . . . Unless you wanted to get to the top just as bad as he did."

"I—I—" Gail curbed his first hesitation. "Did" had leaped to his lips. He stifled it with a qualm of misgiving. He had not considered, in his vivid thrall with fact, the need of justifying his desertion of Bob.

"This Bob was his leader. He obeyed him by going on for the top," said Hartline bluntly. "It wasn't for Gail here to judge. He was likely as off his own nut."

"I didn't say that with any thought of accusing, or holding you responsible," muttered Tom to Gail. "Only you must have had strong notions of your own on the profits of getting to that summit."

"Profits," repeated John, weightily, "ain't always fame or money."

Gail's heart thrilled hotly toward him. Then he boldly faced Guiteau. Had the man any inner inkling of his unutterable rewards?

"Boys!" boomed Hartline. "Do Thain's words ring true to us, or don't they? Them, and what we read of his nature, is all we got to swing us in reporting this Snowden's death to the Marshal."

The others, with sidelong glances equally toward John and Gail, resumed their study of the embers. A flush of challenged pride swept Gail at the mention of Blackwood in this new light. And he felt suddenly fortified by the fact that these men did not withdraw from him to make their comments; but did so before him, deliberately, knowing that he heard and as if in order that he should; yet he was certain that they spoke just as though he were not there.

In obedience to Hartline's call for a verdict, Gail

imagined them reconstructing every point of his narration.

"I don't care," he burst out, "whether anyone believes I got to the top or not."

"Ain't it up to a man that wants to prove you wrong," put in McConighy, "to drag his eyes up to there for a look-see at that photograph tube?"

"Well, I ain't the man," spoke up Tom again. "I say it's up to Thain to convince folks. I don't take any man's word in this world — like as not not even my own."

"Nor do I," growled John, with a shrewd glance at Guiteau. "But I believe Gail here."

"Bob's bound to get the credit some day," Gail exclaimed with eager gratitude.

Then Tom quickly faced him. Gail saw that the hard glitter in his hawk eyes had softened. "I suppose a man like you," said Guiteau intently, "is figuring how to give him that credit right off. He deserves it. Didn't he give his life? Right! — pardner, but how's he to get it?"

"Yes," said Gail with a wary scowl. "That's what bothers me."

There was a silence.

"Well, this country ought to have more of you mountain-climbers," asserted John. And in this pause, Gail's thoughts flashed back, in scorn and triumph, to Pritchard of the *Seward*.

"But don't you want the fame of having got to the top of Lincoln for yourself?" Tom asked searchingly. "I should. You can get and keep it if you're smart enough — a name that might outlive any of your folks. And you spoke as though such a thing might appeal to you."

Impulsively, Gail seized his hand. Like Hartline, then, Tom did read him, veiledly, instinctively. This was not mere sympathy.

"Get Dad here to prove it for you," broke in Luke, grinning. "And I bet you he wouldn't lose an ounce of his heft up on them precipices, neither."

Old Mease, stirred from a brown study of peevish incredulity, yet frowned goodhumoredly. And McConighy, addressing Gail, elucidated —

"We told you what Vinegar Bill, the Siwash at Torlina, got off the time he saw Dad? He looked him over slow-like, and turning to his old woman, says in his choky lingo and sort of yearning, 'That man, he never went hungry.'"

A laugh greeted this, from all except Jonesy, who, forgetful of his demon, had been standing back from the fire, open-mouthed with dawning awe and understanding. It was an encouraging, ostentatious laugh, as if the whole outfit were anxious that Gail should appreciate the satire upon Mease. And then Jonesy, stepping forward into the circle, with a thrust of his white head, demanded aggressively,

"Now you give the decision you asked for on this pardner of mine. Then you listen to me!"

Five pairs of eyes fixed him in astonishment for the silence of an instant. Then John's bass voice echoed through the night, "Ain't we yet? No — by Goliver! But did we need to? *Haven't* we? . . . And any man wants to argue against us better speak up or git to bed. It's near midnight."

Jonesy wilted, overcome by his daze. "This Gail — he's got the makings of a packer in him, too," he muttered, with a melancholy that was lost, in the general movement toward the tent, upon all but Gail. "But

Snowden and me — poor fools dreaming against fate. . . . ”

Outside the tent, Gail crept into the rose-pinto's saddle blankets, his heart full to bursting. Ah, life was too generous to him! The heart of the North too clear and keen with wisdom, too warm and quick in brotherhood. He had gained all that he had set out to find — all, so far as concerned the hungers in them who should win the virgin North.

These were the men of Alaska whom he had conceived, conscripts of its unfathomable spell, to guard the future of this younger than all worlds. He had not vainly put his faith in that guiding Nature, good inherently, which had inspired him on the day of his great despair. Bob was her prophet, of how mankind's vicarious desires may transmute undying life; and these men were the touchstone of his truths for Gail, a providence for him to prove them by in action.

“To give our youngsters a better chance,” John had said. “Money, food, the strength of their children, of our people and country. That's the only Hereafter.” Efficient, resolute, responsible, they were of the real West in root and fibre. They asked but for the scaffold to build the house of life, of all the future; its stuff was of their souls and sinews. Neither labour nor the riches of the land was futile toward their fatherhood. And he was of them now, a link welded into the common chain of life, no longer slag cast out from the cauldron of the Youngest World, a pioneer in his own soul at last. . . . Would he fight for them? *Would he?*

Then, impulsively as of old, misgiving supplanted his exaltation. Tom with his searching mind, his corroded outlook, his quick shifts to sympathy, absorbed

and baffled him, clearly as he felt that he could now interpret men. And Gail, as the North had made him, thought with scorn of what he himself, too, had once been. He reviewed again the wastrels in the *Seward's* smoking-room, the shuffling multitude below the Seattle dead-line, Madge Arnold — Lena. . . .

His tumbling thoughts stopped short. A pained breath escaped him. . . . Clara! Had he forgotten? Never! . . . Her tawny eyes had been the lodestar, piercing his manhood, she alone had saved him, delirious, dying, upon those snows and tundras . . . only so fused and merged herself into his being.

She was with Lamar at Torlina. They would come face to face. As enemies, or lovers? There was no way between! . . .

Staring into the night, Gail's eyes discerned large moving shadows at the edge of the aspens, and he heard the subdued and fitful clang of horse-bells. His heart surging less with gratitude than faith, he lay awake till dawn.

VI

Each morning, white frost gleamed on the scarlet buck-brush of the little tundras girded by stunted spruces that were capped with nest-like "witches' brooms." The deadly ponds of white flowers showed cracked, dry bottoms; willow thickets where Jonesy's beasts had floundered belly-deep in muck were powdered with reddish silt; and in the fords where Gail had stoned and shouted at them, swamping and swept away, the torrents, now pale and greenish, foamed no higher than the horses' flanks.

One after another their roaring sank into whispers. Step after step, hour after hour, day after day — a

few miles on the far trail. Across moist flats in the jaundicing shade of big cottonwoods, over windy passes where the air was white with the filmy spore of fireweed. And one by one the trim spruces solemnly wheeled backward. Peaks grew and glided among one another, black and sharp, now sugared with new snow, flame-hued, olive-dark; new ranges started up and vanished, the old bore strange disguises, chill valleys opened northward, and over all, until time and distance became queer notions — vagaries of that covert wisdom in which the trail coiled on — the white sky and fretted cloud of the North cast down their iridescent glamour.

The day before they should reach the Atna, the other trail, which Gail and Bob had followed from the coast, joined theirs. That night camp was by a willow creek in a fold of the tundra where ice formed toward morning. After breakfast, Tom started out ahead of the pack-train. He said that he was going to pull in to the boys at the cache on the bluff above the river by noon, and asked Gail to foot it with him. He was hammering new Belgian nails into his long russet boots; Gail was washing the last of the dishes for McConighy, who was packing the white grub-horse. But on finishing his job, Gail could find no trace of Tom, and started walking after him.

A sandy plain of open jack-pine and small aspens slanted forward. Behind, its horizontal level cut off the shining mountains just under their peaks; ahead, it lifted in vast bluish refractions, like exhalations, the ranges beyond the river. The trail followed the high scarp above Chenina River, which cut a way toward the Atna five hundred feet below, in a tangle of opaque green threads and ruffs of foam, between fantastic

clay terraces and dizzy steeps of layered silt and iron-stone gravel. But it was after noon before Gail came upon Tom, sitting on a log in the dry pine-needles at one side of the trail, fanning himself with his limp hat.

"You never heard me shout as I left the camp?" he asked, falling in with Gail, who, annoyed and certain that he had not called, did not answer.

"Hartline thinks you're the *hiyu* rustler of this outfit," Tom began, after they had walked a mile in silence. "The way you've brought Jonesy back to life, made him a dog at your heels and a fire-brand against Lamar, has got John hipped. But the' ain't no call for you to rout us out of the tent mornings, round up the cayuses, and cook and wash so."

Gail started in wonder at the boy's motive in these words. When traveling side by side in the weeks past, Tom's talk had been quite impersonal, never including the outfit or himself. He would touch with sardonic admiration upon the grip in which the ilk of Lamar, backed by some juggernaut of dollars, held Alaska — which must be developed by big capital or not at all; upon the wiles of its appointed agents, the alien judges and marshals, who fawned for crumbs of monopoly by flattering the heroic pioneer, the while colouring decisions and serving warrants gun in hand at the wink of their sponsors. He would cynically portray the fatuous hopes and futile dreams of riches in the men for whom John would have the land developed, as a reward for their dogged faith and patient toil with drill and hand-sled. His cutting irony was the bitterness of frustrated striving (not the lazy jealousy of the *Seward* crowd), and in certain stories his words became steeled and hesitant, and Gail knew that the boy's heart

warmed toward these victims of finance. But if his wisdom so young with the seamy sides of effort bespoke a blasted life, it confirmed Gail's first conviction of a surviving, instinctive fineness in Tom. More and more his contradictions absorbed and appealed to Gail, revolted and put him on his guard.

"John's been talking a lot to us about you," persisted Tom. "But I believe Jonesy'd be the poor fool to die for an outfit like this if he got the chance."

"Wouldn't you?" asked Gail. "Someone may have to."

Tom loosed his stuttering laugh. "How could you or I come out the gainer so?" he said. "I've risked more than life with this crowd a'ready. A row like ours only holds the country back. It's better for Lamar and his sort to own Alaska, stake and trail, than have it lie idle. Poor men sitting on their claims a-dreaming and eating sour dough till they get as white as a chunk of it, like Mease and Sanborn, can't help it any. They'll wake up to that some day, and then you'll hear them shootin' one another in the scramble onto Lamar's band-wagon."

Gail glanced suspiciously at his thin, down-turned mouth, his long sinewy neck and curved nose thrown forward. There was craft in his eyes. Yes; Gail wondered why in natures like his own and Tom's the sleepless, incessant struggle of the trail tempered their muscles into iron, hardened their spirit as it hollowed and tanned their cheeks; whereas beings like Luke and Dad, even Bob, the same ordeal made pasty-faced, and often flabby in mind as well as tendon. Some hidden fatality in the land seemed to classify all men sharply thus, irrespective of their bodies' or their souls' worthiness — dispassionate Nature, likely. Gail

had tried to read some clue to this in the outfit, but had found that the close and sudden intimacies of the trail had so saturated him with the least detail in the life or personality of each man, that he could not withdraw his mind far enough for any judgment. . . . One's fellows in the wastes become the sole evidence of existence; you are part of them, and they of you. The world breaks through only in some crisis, and then every character flashes out re-created, with defects deepened, resources intensified.

"I'll trust John," said Gail, "to pull us through." Yet it struck him that although he had talked so intimately with John, he knew him less than any of the others, was ignorant, even, if he were married.

"You notice how glum he's got lately?" Tom asked quickly. "He has no plan of fight, whichever way the Court jumps. Lamar's always had him locoed. We could have burnt their cache and starved them out last year if he hadn't spoke against it the last moment. But you'd think to hear him talk that he'd go through hell's fire for his Kingdom folks. I'd give a fresh plug to know the reason he holds off."

Gail started. Yet he realised that Tom was speaking the truth. The nightly arguments about Lamar, except Jonesy's rabid monologues, had lapsed as the contest drew near. A quiet dejection had seized Luke and McConighy, and Hartline had been curiously reticent and silent, almost morose.

"Grub free, no jackassing a back-pack, and forty dollars a month—of their own money—" went on Tom cynically, "and the sight of coming home millionaires looked good to this outfit once. But shooting dynamite in the ice and holding a No. 2 drill in that peacock ore, in three shifts through the twenty-four,

hours' light, made them homesick — after they seen Lamar's boys getting sixty."

"You're the man to brace their spirits, then," said Gail. "You've got a stake in this outfit, and I haven't."

"Hartline doesn't trust me," said Tom, slowly, casting down his eyes. "And yet, for a man like me, he trusts too far, believes in me too much." A rigid, shameless dejection filled his voice. Gail's awakened penetration was utterly at sea; he had never met a man so hard, yet in whom glimmered such keen aspiration, and a reserve power infinitely good, or evil. "John's too easy. His heart's too big," Tom went on. "We don't many of us see the strength it hides. Likely none but you and me know he looks deeper into things, and cares more how they pan out, than most men." He relaxed the quick pace he had been setting. . . . "What did he tell you about Blackwood?" asked Tom suddenly.

Gail levelled him a quick look. Was the boy trying to veil some remorseful confession, or temptation?

"Only that you were on the trail with him last winter."

"Oh, he did, did he?" exclaimed Tom. "There's no crime in that is there?"

"He's probably told you, too," went on Tom, jerkily, "how I'd throw him if there was any good stake in it." He paused abruptly. Gail could not tell if his admissions were sarcasm or the burden of pent feeling. They were clattering very fast now over a stretch of bare sandstone, and some sparks struck from Tom's new boot-nails. . . .

"What I wanted to say to you today was this," Tom began after a long pause. "I want you to under-

stand me better, as well as I think I see through you. It may come useful to the both of us." He cleared his throat and spat. "I've been married two years. Then my wife had a kid. And quit me. It wasn't my kid. I never give her one yet. And she was the kind — that had a sort of yearning — unnatural, I call it — for them. But ye — ye Gods! I loved her — and I love her still. D'you wonder I'm looking anywhere for a head to punch?"

Gail winced, his head a-swim. How like, yet unlike, his own case! . . . Another had robbed Tom of his self's continuance, blocked his bodily immortality. And he, Gail, must, according to Bob's verdict of charity and destruction, strive for Tom, as for his partners.

"I wanted you to understand that I ain't naturally bad." Tom's voice broke through Gail's rushing thoughts, trembling and boyishly winning. "But jest acid eaten toward life, for a good cause."

Gail placed a fervent hand upon his shoulder. "Don't ever feel shy of me," he said; and for a time the two trudged on without speaking.

"Hello! Look here," said Tom suddenly, stopping short. "Blocked ahead, eh?"

They had come to a fork in the trail. Across its larger branch had been drawn a pile of dead birch brush. The open way, less used, led down the scarp into the canyon of the Chenina.

"That clay cliff beyond here on the main trail must have slid off, the same as last year," the youth went on. "We got to follow down the Chenina to its mouth in the Atna below our cache. Then up the shore, right opposite Lamar, where he could block us from the rest of the outfit."

Gail, filled at once with hope for such a meeting,

remained staring, absorbed by the obstruction. Anger at the rebuff, then a misgiving seized him. Had not Tom been panting furiously when found sitting on that log among the pine needles? Could he have back-trailed from here? Piled the brush?

The pack-train jangled up. Hartline strode forward and scowled; repeated Tom's fear about the clay-bank, as he studied the place for strange foot-prints.

"Lamar couldn't have got by our gang and come out on the main trail," said John. "If this is some trick of his to get a look at us, we ought to see his tracks coming up from the Chenina. Luke, take a turn down toward the river with your eyes peeled."

Luke obeyed; but in a few moments he rejoined the bunched-up horses, reporting that he had seen no human traces. A hushed, questioning speculation broke out.

"Then you can lay your life the' are none," affirmed John gruffly. "It's late now, and I take no chance of having to camp under Lamar's eyes if we don't make into the boys tonight. They must 'a' piled that stuff here to give us a hunch. If the clay-bank's bad, we can camp and cut a way 'round it tomorrow."

Gail noticed that as the outfit cleared aside the obstruction, Tom sullenly hung back.

"There must be tracks here," said John, after the outfit had proceeded a while on the main trail.

All eyes remained fixed on the ground; but saw none.

"Likely he wore moccasins, and kept to the hard spots," said Tom to Gail, both having dropped to the rear; but Gail, glancing up, saw that his face was flushed, his predatory look unusually striking. A sudden thought supplemented Gail's notice of Tom's inaction at the birch branches.

"I dropped my matches back there," said Gail, turning, and he retraced his steps to the forks.

There he studied the leaves and pine-needles on both sides of the trail. Suddenly he fell on his knees, and for a moment his heart slowed down. . . . He had resolved to stand by Tom. And who could gain by giving him away? . . . Yet how like the man! . . . Gail sprang to his feet, and ran on after the others. But he had put a finger into the sharp, octagonal marks of new boot-nails, where Tom, ahead alone, had gathered that brush, to separate the halves of the outfit.

CHAPTER XI

NEWS FROM HOME

I

THE early dusk found them rising from the bed of a creek tributary to the Chenina. The clay-bank glimmered behind. With subdued oaths, they had found no new land-slip; and skirting the old slide in a sullen silence, now regained the open popple of the plateau.

They wound across the broken rock and moss of an old lava flow from the Unalita volcano, plunged through dense spruces, and emerged high above the roar of the Chenina. The trail clung to the edge of the scarp, and in the darkness the tired pack-horses kept slipping their hind-quarters over it, scrambling skittishly for safe footing. They turned into jack-pine once more, traveling for hours with the false sense of momentarily coming out at their cache on the high bluff above the Atna, feeling that it had swerved its course far westward. But at last they caught the red eye of a fire, then the pale mounds of tents looming in its glow, and a brisk hum of voices, at which John started, dropped the pinto's lead-line, and hurried forward.

"*Yo-hooo!*" echoed to his sharp call. Then utter silence. Gail felt an untoward premonition, a foreboding of fatal tardiness.

"There's someone there!" broke out Tom. For an instant the others stopped in their tracks like pointers. "From across the river, from Lamar," said Luke, intuitively. "It couldn't be from no one else." Yet at the fire on the short grass of the open, they appeared

at first to dismiss any apprehension in a babel of greetings with their partners of the advance guard. But Gail observed that by the time all fell to unpacking the cayuses, who waited patiently with drooping heads, the talk had fallen to low tones, in groups and pairs, who seemed no less oblivious of him than of Tom — and of a gaunt, oldish man with heavy tortoise-shell eyeglasses, who was pacing importantly before the fire; clearly, a stranger.

The remainder of the dry-farmers were mostly youngsters, like Tom and Luke; but their voices lacked the spontaneity of youth. Their set and stocky frames moved slowly, with the slight stoop of gruelling workers. They had a premature mannishness, which the light fuzz of hair reaching to their burned noses and clear blue eyes belied. Among them were two older men. One was the hulking, full-lipped, handsome man in worn khaki, who now talking earnestly led John into one of the tents. His lantern-jawed, weather-beaten face showed that maturity was just taking the edge from a rare physique. The other was a quite bald, wiry being, who chewed and spat with nervous aggression. He had a sharp, pallid face intersected with countless little creases, and a harelip which nevertheless gave him the aspect of continually smiling.

Two bulging canvas gunny-sacks lay by the fire near the impressive stranger. He had a steel-grey beard, but his upper lip was unshaven. He wore Siwash buckskin, but unlike Gail's suit, his was elaborately fringed. Very wide cheek-bones and a pair of bulging, red eyes behind his thick-rimmed glasses, gave him a curiously apish look.

"No, sir! Our friends across the river ain't sent me over to ye," he announced, oracularly, as if impa-

tient of the disregard accorded him. "I ain't no emissary, nor peace-maker, nor yet spy." He raised his voice, and waved his hand in the manner of one used to address multitudes. "But Uncle Sam's accredited envoy, embarked upon my duty to ascertain the birth, marriage and divorce statistics of our fish-eating brothers beyond the Scolai Pass. And George Avery, United States census-taker, has brought you boys the mail from home," he ended with a simple unction.

Staring about him, he jingled the bunch of lodge-charms and the carved peach-stone on his watch chain. But receiving no notice of his pleasantries, he lifted the gunny-sacks, untied them, and turned out their contents in two heaps upon the ground; the while he explained to Gail that his learning in ethnology was vital to the very existence of the Census Bureau, which was breathlessly awaiting his statistics of mortality — and morality — in the back of beyond.

But the delay with which the word "mail," and sight of its white piles, penetrated the minds of them who had not for half a year heard from home, measured for Gail their absorption in the general, hushed talk. At length, pair by pair, their eyes wandered to the waiting letters. Suddenly a swift change came over everyone. They fell upon them in an avid, searching silence.

"Here y'are! Obituaries, wedding and christening news from the folks at home," then resumed Avery, pointing to the fast-scattering white oblongs and brown bundles of newspapers. "Oyster-supper bills o' fare and the-atre programs. Busted rattles and locks of hair from the kids. Paid-off mortgages to be burnt right here tonight —"

"Ain't that coming a mite forward about our affairs?" whined Daddy Mease, reaching for a flat paste-

board package bound with a string. And Tom, standing across the fire from Gail, also looking on intently, growled, "Shut up!" although the affairs of Kingdom were no concern of his. Avery only shot him a recoiling glance, subsided and walked away toward his own duffle, remarking appeasingly, "Oh, I meant nothing, boys. I'm with ye in your fight. I hitched my boat this side of the river, and if any of you cross in it, mind you return her, or I'll have the Marshal after ye harder'n he is now."

"Blackwood?" exclaimed Hartline, issuing from the tent, in a voice of command that halted the census-taker. "He ain't a-coming here. But has he got the papers from the court?"

"Nothing about that did he say," retorted Avery, pompously, removing and wiping his glasses. "And though he is in the Gover'ment service with me, I tell you that smart trimmer is looking for anyone's boost, now he wants the next term as judge."

"Whatever Blackwood says," put in the big, stooping man with the weather-beaten face beside John, "you want to believe the opposite."

"But I tell you I had no words with him, and few enough with his boss, Lamar," protested the census-taker. And as Hartline led him to the edge of the clearing, Avery could be heard expounding, "Now there's a smart man, Lamar, and a square one, though you be his enemies. He looks ahead and sees what's right for this country in the long run. And won't estimate his gravel till he's panned it. But that woman with him was a disappointment, after her reputation for a screamer. She's acting as cross-grained and balky to him as a grass widder been surprised by her husband."

Gail's heart burned, dizzily, at this news. But Avery seemed only a wind-bag, pricked by his own words. To hide his confusion, Gail started to help Tom rustle wood for McConighy, who with a bundle of letters in one hand and a spade in the other was digging a bean-hole by the fire. Confusion had followed the general grab for letters, so that the thin, wiry man with the pleasant harelip — addressed as Tony (surname Hoyt, Gail learned later that eventful night) — had shooed the boys away from the mail; and now as he sorted and distributed it, they squatted about like hungry husky-dogs awaiting a mess of entrails. Gail looked on, certain that he could get no letter, yet expectant, as any man is while watching mail distributed. And he had a lurking idea that some day the world "on the outside" must reach him thus to gauge the value of his inner transformations.

Hoyt flipped out the letters, varying his tone in calling each name according to the nature of the recipient. He seemed engrossed in this, like an actor in his part; and although he "joshed" continually, his hits were not resented. Gail divined that he realised the drama of uniting — here in the northern darkness where the smooth, ghost-like slopes of the Unalita with its pig's tail of smoke were visible in the starlight up the valley — the blind faith of sisters and mothers, who veiled their chagrin and yearning in homely sentences, with the guilty perception of that reserve in these beloved ones, shamed yet proud of fighting for their dreams. It was the climax of desperate months in this land of toil and treachery. With a sprightliness more durable than that of the others, Tony was likely stifling his own feelings thus.

"What is it, Luke, a pair of interferers to keep your

pants from chafing you?" he asked, handing him a bulky package, which unrolled a knit, scarlet muffler. "Now across the river," declared Tony, "that goods 'ud buy you Chenilna or any of them squaws for life."

"Willie Barrett, Saw-dust Willie. Souv'nirs of the Subsoil Exposition"—in falsetto, to a sallow, pug-nosed boy, handing him two picture post-cards. And hoarsely, clearing his throat, "Red Hoffman—Peg-eye—it's from her all right. I could tell Nance's writing a mile off," as he flipped a heavy, freckled man a buff envelope. . . . "Here you, George Rankin. It looks like sister Bess has got the job she trained for in the normal school, and's practising on the typewriter."

Each took his letter, like a child drawing a present from his Christmas stocking; and as the white pages fluttered in the firelight, under intent yet unblurring eyes, the silences became prolonged. A tension crept over everyone. Occasionally a drawn face looked up, to stare open-mouthed at the clouds streaming fast and dark on the needled Chugatch peaks, where the Atna—their Rubicon—tunneled glaciers to the sea; to gaze vacantly about the conical spears of the spruces and trim ovals of willow at the edge of the clearing, as might entombed miners emerging into sunlight; as if they heard voices calling, or saw rehearsed against that drear background the words and actions outlined in their letters.

It struck Gail once, with a wave of awe, that back home, looking on at what they were reading of, they would not be moved at all. How the North could play the devil with all one's estimates, even of time and space! He felt a slow loosening of primitive, relentless human forces all around him.

Then he caught Jonesy's querulous voice, over where

Avery was eating supper between a little fire and his tethered buckskin mare, catechising and castigating the census-man as an ally of Lamar's. Soon the silences at hand began to break. Someone would quote from his letter, or crackling open a copy of the Kingdom *Empire*, relate how Ed Denton was seen on Main Street yesterday in a silk hat and a buttonyere — but also with a few clothes. . . . "Doodle Ogden has as fine a mess of watermelons under his south fence as was ever seen in the Northwest." "Charlie Mitchell is awaiting the event. If it's a girl, it'll be the third. Charlie's betting the short end, one to three."

"Got 'em coming, ain't he?" drawled Luke. And as friends were tolled off to the altar, grave, and legislature, Gail felt that Kingdom was his home as well.

Old Mease's fingers trembled as he passed around the contents of his pasteboard missive. For long he had been quietly staring at it, his mouth twitching slightly. It was the photograph of a weary-looking, dark woman dressed in stiff black silk, and holding on her knees a baby girl and a boy in knickerbockers. "That looks right natural — yes, sir, that looks right natural," he repeated again and again, as if to reassure himself of the existence of the likenesses. He leaned over the shoulder of each man, walking about to show the picture. At last after Gail, he was going to hand it to Tom, who was standing between them, but hesitated and then withdrew, with a resentful glance toward him. But Tom seemed not to notice this. He was fixedly watching Tony, who was reaching the bottom of the last stack of mail. Tom pushed Mease aside. Two letters remained. Tony, eyeing the address on the top one, tossed it up to him without a word.

"It's from the wife," Tom said in a low tone to Gail, seeing the handwriting. And after he had opened the envelope and read for a moment, he added in a hard voice, "She wants me to come back. . . . Hell!" He turned abruptly and walked away into the darkness, leaving Gail with a mingled sense of guilt and of deliverance — feelings which in some way impressed him as a part of Tom's own intensity.

Tony was studying the last letter. "Yours, John," he said quickly at length, looking up with an inscrutable curl in his twisted lip, and shying it over Gail's shoulder. "And the' ain't no stamp on it," he added. "It couldn't have come far. Hardly more than across the river, I should think."

Turning, Gail saw Hartline catch it. Instantly a few faces were raised toward him, and Gail, with that suspicion of trickery and an impending crisis which each moment since their arrival had been nourishing, thought that he discerned uneasiness in their looks. But Hartline — impossible! And immediately a tremulous softness in John's deep voice, new to Gail, reassured him.

"It came from Torlina," admitted John, gravely, clapping the note unopened into his pocket; and his frankness appeared generally satisfying, which Gail took as proof of unquestioning loyalty in all hands.

"None for you. Thain, isn't it?" said Tony. "And you'd ought to thank your stars for that," he added, again with latent insinuation.

"Gar-rub!" called Mac from the bean-hole, as he lifted the cover from the dutch-oven in a cloud of steam. And yet, hungry as all hands were, they gathered there slowly, filling their enamel plates and cups, eyes still askance upon their written pages.

Starting after them, Gail felt a touch on his shoulder; John's big, hairy hand detained him.

"Give me a word here, will you?" he ordered; and Gail, with a fugitive tingling throughout his frame — a grim intuition of gathering forces about to challenge all his new courage and vows of service — followed Hartline down the slippery grass over the lip of the bluff, until it hid camp, and the elusive roar of the river enveloped them.

"You noticed how the boys' spirits has wilted lately?" John asked in his low mumble, as they stopped under a glimmering white birch. "Well, these letters'll jolt them. Give 'em an hour or two. Such news as comes from home this time'll temper their mettle. Have you watched them a-reading, so quiet, without an oath nor the shiver of an eyelid? They'll be a different crowd when they get done chewing all over to themselves. They're young, and men. Glacier bears at bay'll be squirrels to the timidest." He paused, peering toward a clump of aspens just below. "I seen stains, that was wet when posted, on some of them letters. . . . You get a look at that picture of Dad's? At the sufferin' and confidence in his old woman's eyes? Well, not one of the rest but has the like flashing in his heart, scrouging into his lights — a moving picture of home. And you can gamble that some of them ain't as cheering as old Mease's." There was a catch in his voice.

"Hark! What's that noise yonder?" he asked suddenly, starting, darting a look toward the grove of popple.

Gail, a-quiver with excitement, craned his neck thither, but heard no sound. "There's nothing there," he said, trying to speak evenly.

For the silence of a moment, they raised their eyes

across the river. Its wide tangle of channels was visible in faint silver threads, through the earth-mist far below. The dim flat of Torlina was vaguely discernible, in the great elbow where the western scarps sank back against the mountains. Gail's eyes filmed over; his bosom swelled. Was that a light? He caught the weird wolfish howl of a husky-dog found thieving, and beaten by one of Nacosta's tribe. Then John said in a quiet, gentler voice:

"I told you we'd ought to watch Guiteau. Well, he's at the end of his tether now. I didn't guess, until we got to the clay-bank, that it was his trick to shunt us from the trail by piling that birch heap. . . . He sold us out to Blackwood—which means Lamar—sledding with the Marshal last winter. There's no use putting it up to him yet. He'd just deny it, say it was a mistake. But every cartridge he cached here is a .38, and we ain't got a gun under a .44."

Gail clutched his fists, forced back an angry gagging in his throat. John Hartline bit his plug of tobacco furiously.

"We got nothing," he added, "but the score of shells in Luke's belt, and the automatic, to hold against Lamar. And he must know that by now. And Luke's cartridges don't fit nothing but Tony's carbine."

II

John's words rose and fell in a telling rhythm. In the indistinct light, his bronzed features stood out with a hammered, metallic look.

"Things is at a head that may mean anything, any minute," he boomed out suddenly. "Avery—that stuffed old lunatic—don't know whether Blackwood's got the decision or not. But he's at Torlina.

Bluff is all we got to play, after settling with Guiteau."

There was a strained silence, in which Gail thought that he heard the grind of John's teeth.

"But I wanted to make a proposition to you," Hartline went on finally. "I took chances on you from the beginning. But you've made good with us, more than good. I've been watching you and talking with the outfit. They're all for you, even Dad. Will you pitch in with us on a fair footing, stand by and help us in our fight?"

Gail could not believe his ears. He felt an angry wave of humiliation that John had not assumed that he was going to cast his lot with the outfit's.

"If you're agreeable, I offer you an interest in my own stake—in half all my property in Alaska," he kept on. "But you must choose with eyes open, knowing how near to ruin we may all be."

Gail's finger-tips dug into his palms. An undercurrent of entreaty in John's voice enraged him. He could contain his feelings no longer.

"I don't know what to make of you, John," he began quietly, gripping himself. "You talk to me like that, think I'm for hire? You want to make me hit you," he said hoarsely, with scorn for John's seeming deep simplicity. "Don't you know me yet better than to think I'd take a bribe—a bribe to do the only thing that makes life worth living for me now? I feel a coward to think that you hadn't taken for granted by this time I'd fight Lamar with you," he ripped out fiercely. "Why, you men are a providence to me. Oh, I'd like to tell you things!" His voice shook.

All his lessons with Bob filled Gail's brain to bursting, rushed to his lips, in pledges of fellowship and sym-

pathy. But as once with Tom, and with the same instinctive reticence that he should not be understood, he checked a confession. And John appeared stolid, unmoved by what he had said. Then it dawned through Gail, explaining what he had thought was John's sordidness, that the man's stake in Alaska was on a par with life itself to him. Leaning forward, he caught a fiery gleam in John's grey eyes. He remembered, with renewed misgiving, the unstamped letter from Torlina, and Tom's charge that John held off from striking at Lamar.

"Without arms we can't move on him in a body, if call came for that," growled John. "We've got no leader in case of having to do business with Lamar direct."

"Why not?" blurted Gail, but shrewdly, in grim astonishment that guile might underlie his power and reserve. "What's the matter with yourself?"

For a moment John dropped his head, his shoulders trembled, and his breath came hard. "I can't meet Lamar, go into his camp myself," he confessed in a strained, hopeless tone. "And I can't tell you nor anyone the reason," he broke off. "The boys 'ud never understand."

"You mean," asked Gail boldly, "that it's got to do with that letter from Torlina to night?"

In the silence, Gail thought with desperation, "Is no one to be trusted?" Then John jerked up his head. "Yes," he said, almost inaudibly. "And don't you ask me any more. You got to take the chance on me I took on you. Let the rest suspect what they're a-mind to, but you got to trust me, Gail."

Roughly, he thrust out his hand. And Gail, overcome by the force of his honesty, seized it. He saw

that suspicion between them was impossible, else the whole issue against Lamar was ridiculous. And the tightening of John's corded hand upon his own effaced all his doubts for good.

"What's the matter, then, for the big man you've been talking to seeing Lamar?" harked back Gail, relieved, still restraining himself.

"Hank Ireson?" asked John. "I thought of him, and he wants to scout across there. But his temper riles too quick. And he's too much of a 'show-me' man. He'd stampede himself, and likely founder us."

"Let me go then!" exclaimed Gail, with a sudden vehemence. He felt a thundering in his ears. "Lamar don't know me, so —"

He was cut off by the clinch of John's hand upon his arm. Gail switched about, facing the clump of aspens.

"Listen! I told you someone was hid there," John whispered.

They held breath. Two muffled voices could be heard. Then one of them rose in sudden anger. There was a crackle of twigs, and a figure burst from the grove, muttering fiercely to itself, and scurried up the slope towards camp.

"Tom!" they uttered together. His long, light boots, the lithe, sliding run, were unmistakable. "And the's another in there."

Their eyes met. With an oath, John started running after Guiteau. But Gail seized him by a shoulder, drawing him back.

"See here," he said, impulsively, "do all the boys know about him and the cartridges?"

"Know?" echoed John. "Ireson found it out the day the first crowd got here. Ain't you seen everyone

leave Tom alone tonight? They only can't nerve themselves to strike a pardner as yet."

Gail, glaring at the ground, formulated his chaotic thoughts.

"You've asked something of me tonight and I've given you my word," he said at length. "Now let me do the same with you." Gail paused, fortifying his proposal with the memory of what Tom had revealed from his letter. "Let me manage Guiteau, will you?" he demanded. "Prove that you can trust me that far, too."

John started, faced him, stroked his matted beard. "All — right," he conceded. "It'll save me a heartless job. And I don't see what more dirt he can do us, if we hold him here in camp." Then he nodded toward the aspens. "But who was he talking with down there?"

"Jonesy, I believe," said Gail, engrossed. "Jonesy raising hell with Tom like he has been with that census-man."

"What's your lay-out for Tom?" asked John, satisfied, starting to mount the slope.

"Making him confess to the crowd," Gail declared, through set teeth. "Let the man have open judgment. Maybe he ain't the blackguard now that he was six months back."

III

The camp loomed, silent, over the rise. Against every tent wall glowed the little moon of a candle, by each of which a head propped on an arm weighed the news from home. To the right, the snores of the grandiloquent Avery issued from the whitish hump of

his tarpaulin wrapped around him. But dead ahead, alone on the grub-box by the dying campfire, Tom sat with his head craned forward between his hands.

Gail lifted a piece of dead brush from the grass and threw it on the embers. It illuminated Tom's rigid features, drawn in their hardest animality; but they remained immobile.

Instantly John gave three short, low whistles. Scarcely had these left his lips, when Gail wheeled about on him.

"Hold on!" he muttered. "Not yet ——"

"Now's the time," scowled John, "for Guiteau to unbosom. Or he'll be getting away in Avery's boat."

Gail, curbing his resentment, did not reply. He grasped that regardless of any compact with John, this dominant man held, and would hold, all course of action in his own hands.

At once the moons began to move behind their canvas. The tents became all astir. Dishevelled, still booted figures, some sleepily, others staring with wakefulness, emerged like bees from a prodded hive, in a hum of apprehension and alarm; and Gail saw that many of them clutched white pages in their hands.

"Thain here is with us, one of us now," John's quiet, penetrating voice silenced them. "You're to take his orders the same as mine. And he's got a word to say to one of us, before all of you."

The murmurs quieted, then rose approvingly, as Gail, steeling himself, heard his name called and felt all eyes centring upon him. Then they deflected toward Tom, still sitting motionless and head-down, as if the company perceived a hidden tie between them.

Hank Ireson's big, stooping form pushed itself for-

ward into the firelight. He raised an arm, flung a thing into the ashes — a paper which broke into flame.

“John as good as says we’re at our show-down,” he exclaimed. “Then let’s give some bond of how we feel and are a-willing to act. . . . Fire your letters, boys, all of you!” he cried. “Show the answers we give to them this time ain’t going to be written with pen and ink. That we’re the men to burn our bridges behind us, and write home no more half-lies, until we can cut our trail there. If not at the muzzles of our guns —” he looked at Tom, “then in any way God or this land of ours affords us.”

He kindled a cheer, which it seemed must have reached across the river. Again Gail’s being was shocked by those culminating, vindictive forces in the men before him, which he had divined and John had dwelt upon. Some of them, who had left their letters in the tents, sprang after these, in the turmoil of voices, of moving faces, of arms shot forward into the fire. In Gail’s vowed fealty to these men, he saw that he might act for them aside from his will and judgment, though instinctively for their ends; and yet, that however he served them, no sacrifice of his could ever requite the means they offered for fulfilling the truths with which Bob and the North had inspired him. Then a sense of unworthiness clouded this access of partisanship.

The throng surrounded him again, and there floated away from the sinking flames charred wisps of paper on which the writing stood out in skeleton, silver filigree.

“Then mightn’t Thain, as our new leader, say a word or two to hearten us?” It was Tom’s voice. The outfit held its breath, turning again toward the grub-box. The youth had risen, thrown back his head, and

spoke with a slow, snarling irony. "Not being from Kingdom, Gail here can look at our business with some horse sense."

Menacing voices silenced him. Luke guilelessly jumped forward and seized Gail by the hand.

Gail heard Tom, dazed. The nerve of the man! Found out and trapped, did he presume upon the afternoon's compassionate talk to appeal for an ally?

"Tom!" ordered Gail, striding forward into the ashes, as a dizziness swept him. "Hear me now!"

"This Gail ain't told us nothing about himself, nor his stake in this country, outside of mountain-climbing," went on Guiteau, with calm insinuation. "He was ahead with me when the trail was blocked, and the's others can tote cartridges and rob caches beside me and Blackwood."

Gail felt all eyes fix upon himself. Having failed to tempt him, Tom sought to accuse, did he? To involve him, his own champion? For a vivid instant Gail felt helpless, the tables turned against him, at least as an intercessor. . . .

"Cut that and listen to Thain!" swelled out John's stentorian voice. "And understand you're our prisoner."

"Am I?" Tom retorted with a bold jeer. "But don't you want the two of us. Not Thain, I mean, but this old friend of ours I see a-coming up toward us from the river."

He pointed thither, over their heads, down into the dark where Gail and John had conferred. For the first time since Tom had spoken, the bewildered, spell-bound company found breath and voice, as they caught sight of the approaching figure enter the penumbra of the camp fire.

An angry murmur broke the stillness before anyone made out who the stranger was. Gail's impression was of seeing a narrow, thin-lipped, sallow face, accentuated by very black eye-brows and long hair like a quack doctor's, under a fedora hat; of in-bent knees in black trousers, a sable, drooping moustache, and sagging cheeks — jowls chastened by unwelcome exercise, and shaven blue. The man tossed aside long gauntlets.

Then he bowed his head, and calmly, without a word of greeting, began rubbing his hands together with a laving motion in the glow of the embers. Gail's sight centred on his fingers, their tips flat and spatulate, their nails broken, corrugated. The fellow raised his face toward John, who had quietly seated himself on the box beside Tom, and Gail saw that the large, liquid pupils of his eyes were rimmed with a fishy blueness; and that he carried a belt heavy with shells, and a large revolver in a raw-hide holster.

The curdling stillness again pervaded, broken only by Avery's untroubled snores.

"Hello, Blackwood!" issued from Ireson's square jaw, where Hank stood with his long arms reaching almost to his knees, his palms held outward.

IV

"Have some supper?" suggested John. "It must 'a' been some play crossing the Atna in the dark. Gail, that was the Marshal we heard a while ago." But Hartline made no move from the grub-box.

"I come with news for you men," ventured Blackwood in a strained, amiable voice. "Vinegar Bill took me across on his raft," he added blandly.

"You're in an all-fired rush to see us, ain't you?"

spoke up Tony. "We'll save Vinegar the trouble of taking you back, I guess."

"Ain't you boys going to listen and hear me out?" he asked with a quick vigour, staring about him. Yet there was pleading in his tone. He was hardly Gail's idea of an Alaskan politician.

"Open up then," said John, rising, and folding his arms. "Give him his tether, pardners," dropping his tone to a curious hardness.

The faces craned forward, and Ireson bent down and threw a log on the coals. The Marshal raised his hands against the bright crackle, as if to shield his face from the heat; but it struck Gail that thus he also avoided the glances of both Tom and John, standing side by side.

"The Judge of the Second District has rendered his decision in the matter of the Torlina townsite," Blackwood said with a quavering distinctness. He looked once, furtively, over his shoulder toward the flat across the river; then, throwing out his chest under its white shirt, he continued blatantly:

"You may as well know that it's in your favour. His Honour restores the tract to you, as a homestead location. It's yours to take possession of as soon as you sign the deeds. Men, I congratulate you."

First the circle of faces in the tremulous light had exchanged a dogged, hopeless impatience. Now they broke into whispers of astonishment and unbelief, which rose into denying exclamations, sarcastic chuckles, voices that charged a cold lie. Yet in the stir of bodies, none could conceal an underlying elation.

"Then where's the verdict? You got it with you?" challenged Hank. He sobered all of them, an image

of the impetuous, hard-headed, incredulous man that John had signified.

"Across the river, ain't it?" proffered Tony, bitterly; and at Gail's elbow, Red Hoffman sneered, "What's the price he gets for lying?"

For a moment Blackwood faced these insults unflinchingly. Then, jerking both arms above his head, he brought them down smashingly on the air, like a fanatic street-preacher, shouting—

"I've switched. Boys, I'm with you in yer fight. You're right, by God, you're right. My life on that, by the braced wheel of the Almighty!"

"Stow it!" bantered McConighy; and in the dead pause some one hinted that the Marshal was drunk. Ireson advised him to keep on and hang himself. Yet his avowals had plainly told upon all.

"You seem to be packin' enough shootin'-irons to have us believe what you're a-mind to," drawled Tony. But the Marshal, paying no heed, continued dramatically:

"You men think you know me, and that my lay's always been bad, do you? Well, you're wrong, all wrong. Yes; I owed Lamar a debt, a political debt. He had me appointed. But that's paid now, and I'm done with the like of him." He stopped suddenly, as if at a loss; then went on with a slight gasp, "And when I first come to this country, I wanted to bleed it, grab my stake, hike outside and spend it, *blow* it in, the same as everyone in this midge-bitten swamp of rocks and ice. Ain't we all on the frontier got that disease?" He flicked out a white silk bandanna, and mopped his brow. . . . "But, pardners, it's our last free country, this, we ain't got no other, and the men

like you has hungered and suffered for it. A long time I've been a-studying you and chewing things over — the bigger needs of this land, for the future, and for justice to its real, heroic pioneers. And I had my mind set by last spring, before this verdict was turned in, that Lamar and his heelers has got this country started wrong, all wrong. I've come to love this cold, rich land, that makes men out of cowards, or drives them out of it."

His voice vibrated, raucously mingling bombast and pathos. His honesty puzzled Gail; real contrition and deceit seemed inextricably mixed in his outburst; yet he expressed Gail's and John's creed for Alaska. Thus the guffaw that greeted him abashed Gail. Even Blackwood, he thought, should not be denied fair play, until proved a liar. But if then —!

"It's a nice trap, ain't it?" derided Tony. Hank snorted, "What man won't quit his job, after maybe his boss has lost out?" But John raised a silencing hand.

"I come across here," Blackwood yelled, unshamed, "primed, set, and hired by Lamar for a faked story to tell you. I was to get you down-river and away from here at any price, by saying that the court had sided against you, that he had forty men with him, all armed to their jaw-bones, and it was suicide for you to face him. But crossing the river tonight, my conscience got the better of me, I see I couldn't sell my honour that way to no such sharp fiend, to a dog as low as him. It was a turning point, boys, for a man like me. I grit my teeth and swore to tell you, friends, the truth and throw him over —" his voice sank feelingly, "though my getting to be judge is all in his backers' hands."

"Why didn't you bring the papers with you, then?" growled Hank, imperviously.

"Or pack us back our .44 shells," demanded McConighy, "that you stole with Tom."

Instantly, at mention of his name, Guiteau, who had been listening rigid, with curling lips, sprang forward into the light. He rammed his hands carelessly into his pockets, cocked his head on one side; but, as he began to speak, at first unnoticed by the outfit — now engrossed by larger issues than his treachery — Gail saw a hateful glitter in his bulging eyes.

"Blackwood here means all he says about flopping," Tom began, easily. "He's telling you the truth there. That's why I hate the skunk. I've just had it all out with him, down yonder in the brush. And I'd be talking like him now, if I was the coward he is. But I'm only a traitor — a traitor to my pardners on the trail. And you've found me out. I don't need to allow how I give myself to Blackwood for a bribe last winter. You judge me now, do with me as you see fit," he raised his voice, "but first you got to choose between the two of us."

He paused, wet his lips, taking a deep breath. A kind of choked fervour in his words was token enough of their sincerity for Gail, who perceived that Tom held the outfit's ears, and their eyes cast down, as the Marshal had not.

"But this turn-coat Blackwood," went on Tom scathingly. "He ain't even got the honour of thieves. Lamar wouldn't stand no more for his hold-ups, jumped his game, so he's come snivelling to your side with heart-throbs about the good of Alaska. But mark me, men —" his tone broke with feeling, "I've quit him not because I do repent, or don't, for how I sold you. I

loathe the black-leg for having turned against them he sold himself to. I hate the white-livered ingrate for his double-faced welching in the game he started to play — for his hypocrisy to me, let alone Lamar. If a man who serves the devil flim-flams him, and comes fawning up to shake with Jesus, why even the Lord ought to spit in his mealy face!”

His voice shook with passion. A tumult of cries was hurled vindictively against the Marshal, who had shrunk from the fire, raising his arms before his shaking jowls. Gail felt that tough, underlying loyalty which the trail breeds between partners assert itself toward Tom.

“Hear him out!” ordered Gail, unable to contain himself, impelled by that dominating force outside his will. “It’s our choice between this pair. And I’m standing by Guiteau!”

“Thain, mebbe you think I’ve begun to play straightfor’ard because of that letter I got tonight.” Tom faced Gail, curbing himself. “But that ain’t why. It might be a reason with some men, but not me. My heart’s too black a’ready. I’m only acting according to my nature, which a minute back set me against you, too. It mayn’t be in me to stick by my pardners, but it is to smash at them that breaks with me.” He turned to the others. “And whether this’ll land me back with you or not, is for you boys to settle amongst you.”

“I’d as soon believe the devil as either of them,” swore Hank.

“Men!” boomed Hartline huskily. “Thain has put it straight for you about this pair.”

There was a splitting stillness; then a defiant hum, which concentrated upon Blackwood.

He tried to cower back into the shadows, but a dozen hands thrust him forward. His fedora hat fell off into the fire.

"That man Thain — there. I arrest him in the name of the law," Blackwood cried, beside himself. "I got it from Guiteau how you murdered John T. Snowden's son on Mt. Lincoln for his money, and fooled these men with your lies. That mountain-climber's father runs Lamar's steamers for him. They're all the same gang."

For an instant Gail's heart boiled, at the man's stratagem, illogical as it was, to bolster his discredited contrition, to attack the partisan of Tom's that Gail had shown himself to be. But immediately Gail saw that this move only sealed the general decision against the Marshal and for Guiteau, and rallied the outfit to himself and Tom. Blackwood made a break forward. Hank Ireson, fully angry at last, sprang at the man and held him by the wrists.

"I guess we want something like a murderer with us now," drawled John, "to deal with gentlemen like you. . . . Gail, what had Hank better do with him?"

"Make him tell the truth about the court's verdict," interjected Tony. "Half-nelson his arms."

"You've called my bluff — you —" panted Blackwood weakly, his long hair grotesquely mussed. "But I'm still game. I tell you I ain't seen that judgment. I brought it sealed by the Court's orders to leave with Lamar. But Lamar was a-going to throw me, so I was taking the only gamble."

Believed or not, a roar went up at the confession. Somehow his words convinced Gail, and despite the Marshal's attack, his scorn mingled with pity for the coward in his plight.

"We got to get those papers ourselves, boys," Gail shouted.

"Then grab his gun and shells," cried Luke. "We need 'em for that."

A ringing cheer echoed him. And then, whether its venom spurred Blackwood's strength into a superhuman resistance, or he had caught Hank's grip relaxing under the impact of this crisis, the Marshal, with a desperate fling of his whole body, freed his arms, dodged madly through the throng, across the open, and down the bank toward the river.

V

For the space of a second, the amazed dry-farmers stood rooted. And then that smouldering fury stirred by the news from home reached its climax. At last the outfit had found a target for the wrath of their desperate four years. Gail felt the air about him pulse with the unleashing of a furious human frenzy, translated into swift and silent action.

"Go for him, boys!" roared John. "He's hiking back to Lamar!"

"Git him! Git him!" screeched old Daddy Mease.

A dark, surging tide of figures swept across the swale. Gail found himself in the van of them with Tom. Each guessed that Blackwood, repudiated, vengefully re-seeking Lamar, would strike first for the grove of aspens on his way back to the raft. And as these loomed into sight, he was scarcely ten yards ahead of them.

Overtaken, he turned without a sound, and Tom sprang at him. Gail held off. Whatever he owed the Marshal, the first and heavier debt was Guiteau's.

The rest caught up, panting with anger, blazing-eyed.

"Give Blackwood his show!" called John; and all kept back, watching the lunges of shadowy arms, hearing the fleshy chug of fists. Tom held him off by the throat, overpowered. Gail wondered at the boy's lack of malice. He seemed to spare him as if he were some unclean thing, as he tugged at Blackwood's belt of shells.

"Trust Tom. I know him," blurted Gail to John. "He won't say so, but he'll be fighting with us yet. That letter he got was from his wife — good news — though as he says, not that, but his hard nature's swinging him."

John nodded sombrely, benignly; and it flashed through Gail how mixed were men's motives, how quixotic their acts. For instance: it was not chiefly the Marshal's accusation of murder that enraged Gail against him; but rather his hypocrisy, as agent of the land's despoiler.

And he, Gail, had succoured Tom, as Bob would have done, and scored a victory.

Suddenly he saw Guiteau standing alone at the edge of the grove, holding Blackwood's revolver and holster at arm's length, with the cartridges and belt dangling from them. The Marshal had vanished.

But it scarcely amazed Gail that he himself was the first of the on-lookers to spring forward, grab the gun from Tom, and dash on, downward after the fugitive, into the blind darkness of the surrounding spruces.

CHAPTER XII

THE CANVAS HOUSE

I

FREE! In the over-mastering purpose which all the evening had been formulating to him. Across the deep, chaotic blackness of the Atna, was Clara. . . . Clara! And for the third time, since in that Cascade cabin he had awakened to new life, Gail was quitting a drama at its height, also under an irresistible spur to grapple with its larger, underlying issues, and now according to the visions that he had suffered on the mountain.

The dense spruces, their short, nether branches dead and hanging with filmy moss from the river dampness, seemed to glide apart, hastening his downward plunge; to close in impenetrably behind. But it was not until he emerged into the clear starlight of an open, and found himself sliding across the short, withered grass, that he discerned the faint trail which he was following — the track surely leading to the ford across the Atna.

The shouts that had broken out behind him were already growing fainter. They sounded very high above, as he re-entered the muffling timber. The boys were swerving up-river, which assured Gail that either they had missed Blackwood's sole avenue of escape, or that the Marshal had dodged from the trail to hide. Pausing, he conceded the latter chance without solicitude. He buckled the gun and cartridges about his waist. He had not sprung forward and seized them under any

personal, vindictive impulse against Blackwood. The deceitful Marshal was but a minor issue. Gail saw far beyond him as the dry-farmers' nemesis; he had even pitied the man. And he was armed now, with the way open to Avery's boat.

The slope leveled suddenly, the forest ended, as if cleaved off by a landslip. Gail's boots grated upon rock, and he shrank back, in a gust of water-chill air, from the edge of a precipice. Staring about, he saw that he had lost the trail. So, both to get bearings and to gather his wits, he crept forward, and with an odd, hair-raising dizziness thrust his head from the edge which he had all but pitched over.

It appeared to under-cut him, slanting for sheer hundreds of feet into the boiling Atna, at first invisible where its flood swung against the cliffs. Then a low, cavernous thunder reached his ears, and he felt an hypnotic thrill in the pulse of those distant, solemn eddies. As his eyes grew used, all the river's vast complication of sand-bars, channels, slues, wooded islands and sheets of mist dawned upon them, like a bird's-eye map: the shuddering foam where a muddy tide combed over mid-stream boulders with the reverberating hum of surf; and beyond all, the disputed expanse of Torlina, a plain of dusky fog, bounded by the pale clay ovals of the opposite valley-benches. No dogs howled there now. The silence was desolating. Indians and white men, Lamar and Clara, all slept.

Yes! This was Gail's moment. Hartline, himself so grimly diffident (and the outfit armed only with the automatic and Tony's carbine), had chosen him to cross the river. He alone was unknown to the enemy. He was the man to penetrate Lamar's camp, to learn the truth of the court's decision. He was indifferent

whether or not this should involve violence. His creative love, his discipleship to Bob Snowden's wisdom of life, united to spur him onward. Yet Blackwood was the one menace, if he reached the river, and taking the census-man's boat or the Siwash's raft, returned to fawn upon and warn his master. Gail felt the goad of that hard hand of circumstance which twice before, at like moments, had impelled him forward; once to defeat, once to victory; each time to despair, which yet provoked a deeper triumph in understanding toward mankind, and their veiled aims of existence.

Rising, Gail heard the spruce branches behind him crackle. His eyes met Jonesy's snowy, bullet head. The creases of the man's gaunt but heavy features stood out like scars. He was breathing hard; the tension of his excitement warned Gail that his sanity of the week past had crumbled.

"Jonesy!" he uttered. "Where've you been all this time?"

Memory assailed Gail in an uncanny shiver. There arose before him, like some supernatural portent, the scene and circumstance of their other meeting at the edge of a precipice.

"The both of us has a hunch fer cliffs, ain't we?" Jonesy chuckled lightly. "Jump. . . . Let's — over. . . . You want to make me this time? Things for us has got to end, so long as we buck Lamar. What's living, if not for daughters and such? But a man's long learning that."

He was leaning over the abyss with braced limbs. Gail, quaking and sickened with a reasonless flush of guilt, gripped Jonesy by the collar of his ragged jumper and whipped him backward. As he collapsed upon the carpet of spruce spines, Gail's question seemed

to dawn through him, and he answered dazedly, still panting: "Be'n down to the river for Blackwood's raft, to turn it loose. Missed her. And lost the up trail." Then, with a flash of his grey, burning eyes, he began to laugh heartlessly, raspily, and burst into anathemas against Lamar, his stratagems and brutalities.

"You show me how you reached the river," Gail ordered roughly, dragging him to his feet. Yet Jonesy's presence encouraged rather than oppressed him. For the man had hit upon the basic tie between them in his first words. And Tom's hint that afternoon, of Jonesy as a voluntary martyr to the outfit's cause, appeared prophetic, stirring Gail's protective sense.

They skirted the ledge, veered down-stream, and diving into the woods, quickly found the steep trail again, where it passed from the spruces into a hard-wood grove. In the lead Jonesy sharpened with a whining falsetto his oaths against monopoly and a traitorous government. He seemed ignorant of the facts in the dry-farmers' case, and his virulence was quite unreasonable. But it was as if some latent hate of spoliation in the dumb heart of the land itself, the force of justice for a fair reward to its true pioneers for their discoveries and privations, were transmuted to his mind instinctively, directly. They came out on top of an abrupt clap slope, and leaping over it, sent down jumping and scittering slides of gravel. For a while in their swift descent, silence cut off any hint of the pebbles' destination. A rising bank of mist smothered the starlight. Jonesy's voice steadied, and he switched to the "rush" days of '98 on Valdez Glacier, where men froze to death in the howling scud while eating soup squares and canned

tomatoes on their sleds; to his friend Mrs. Batty, who kept her phonograph playing "The Banks of the Wabash" up there, to warn you from crevasses which already held a hundred bodies—"Like flies in amber." And he began to sing shrilly:

"Oh, the wind is clear and cool along the Atna,
In the distance lie the glaciers still with snow. . . ."

All at once, above the now accustomed roar of the river, they heard the *pock! pock!* of their tiny avalanches striking water. They met a layer of icy air, heavy with the limey smell of dried glacier silt. They slid, blindly. And when they had regained their feet, were standing on a strip of the hard shore rubble, beside the suck and wallop of the great current.

The cries on the heights had died away. The shock of their fall had stopped Jonesy's lips. He gripped Gail by an arm, and with a throaty exclamation pointed out into the fog. Vaguely they discerned in an eddy up-stream the outline of a log, which as they sprang toward it, casually extended into a raft, bobbing in the back-wash; and mute and stolid on a boulder near it, unmoved by their thudding descent, sat a figure dressed in weathered buckskin. Gail might have mistaken it for an image of himself, except for the low forehead and wide-apart eyes of the man's dark and oval face, the thongs which bound his legs under the knees, and the row of brass clock-wheels sewed across the crown of his felt hat.

"Vinegar Bill—hey?" demanded Gail, recalling Blackwood's mention of the owner of the raft. And the Siwash rose with a shy twist of his shoulders, and a guttural response, like a titter, from his throat. "We'll cast her off. Before he's wise," Gail breathed

to Jonesy, whipping out the knife which he had last used on the top of Lincoln.

But as Gail bent over the rock to which the logs were tied, two coincident acts kept him from cutting the rope. The Indian, scenting his purpose, jerked it into the air from the stone with a lithe twist of the end which he held in his hand; and at the same instant a torrent of gravel from the slope above volleyed upon the three men. They caught sight of a blur shooting down through the fog. The next moment, the long inky locks of the bare-headed Marshal lifted under their noses, as he scrambled upon his knock-kneed, black-trouserer legs.

"Shoot — shoot!" bawled Jonesy. Gail's hand flew involuntarily to his belt, but the hunted, gasping desperation of Blackwood checked him.

"He ain't armed. It 'ud be murder," mumbled Gail, catching sight through the mist of the man's sallow, jowled features, livid with terror and surprise. "Back there!" he cried to Jonesy, who had made a lunge at the Marshal. And Jonesy plially yielded, but cursing; meanwhile Vinegar Bill, conceiving the encounter to be some peculiar whiteman's devilishness, stood rooted, grinning, yet considering flight.

"Let me onto my raft," croaked Blackwood, with a weak truculence. He raised his twisted hands, palms outward, with a menacing gesture which struck Gail as grotesque, feminine somehow; and threw his loose-jointed frame against him.

"You get up the bank there! Back to your dupes!" Gail heaved him off, scornfully, steeling his self-control not to strike the pitiable, trembling guardian of the law, so shorn of his authority and his pretence alike. "Let them settle with you!"

"My blankets. They're on the raft," he pleaded, withdrawing. "Vinegar, Oh! Vinegar Bill, git them for me. Then I'll go back, you —" A febrile anger choked his words.

The amazed Vinegar dropped the rope, yet placidly stepped out upon his craft, and began tugging at the bundle wrapped in a yellow slicker that was lashed to the out-board logs. He fumbled at it for a full minute, during which Gail and Jonesy watched him in a tolerant, uneasy silence, their backs turned to the Marshal, who shrank downstream into the haze. The Indian seemed unable to free the thing. At last with a plaintive whoop he sprang up from his task, and Gail saw that the unsecured logs, caught in the current, were beginning to glide down with it. Again Vinegar shouted, grabbing one of the two hewn paddles on the raft, as Gail and Jonesy started running along the shore after it. Suddenly in front of them they heard the clicking thump of nailed boots, and Blackwood's figure loomed ahead, racing across their course, toward the river below the point where the raft was passing. They gave an angry, baffled cry and redoubled their pace; but the Marshal had plunged into the current, and when they caught up abreast of him, he was drawing himself up dripping upon the logs, as Vinegar Bill, strongly plying his paddle upstream, edged the craft straight out into the river.

With a yell, Jonesy started to dash into the current after it, but Gail dragged him violently back.

"Quick — you fool — find Avery's boat!" he muttered between his teeth. "If we cross on their raft, we can't keep them from landing, unless we all four drown." His voice was hard and sinister; his malice

was aroused at last. "Come on!" he started groping on the run downstream.

But this time Jonesy did not obey. All the pent and smouldering bitterness of his poor life fed his mad, awakened rage at Blackwood's escape. That culmination which Tom and Gail had divined, which he himself had alternately fought and yielded to, now overpowered him. With an hysterical half-laugh, half-shout, "I—I'll bitch him, bitch him!"—he threw himself into the river after the raft. Gail, halting below, had caught a glimpse of his distorted face, more like a death's-head than ever. He stood impotent, stock-still, his bosom a-flame, a melting fever in the back of his eyes, which for the moment blotted all his exalted designs. For excruciating moments, tortured by the undertone of the river, he failed to see Jonesy rise to the surface. He knew—why the man kept under. Perhaps that knowledge, perhaps his own mastering instinct for self-perpetuation, convinced him that it was fatuous to risk a rescue. Out at the edge of the fog a wave-crest flopped over with a whitish tremor, and Gail felt his flesh creep.

Uncontrolledly he shouted, again, and again. Outward he strained his ears and eyes, all his raw and outraged senses, into the hum and darkness of the flood. Not a sound. The useless, pathetic, inevitable sacrifice! The thought of it had been heroic; how blighting was the truth!

Gail turned and ran, unseeing, down the river, with a morbid feeling that he was following the body, until he stumbled over a sharp-cornered boulder. Picking himself up, he saw that a rope passed under it. A square, coffin-shaped hulk, built of thick, whip-sawed

boards, its seams black and dripping with hardened pitch, was hauled in there upon the gravel.

II

Sight of the census-man's boat, and the thought that Blackwood might now be half way over to Torlina, vividly returned Gail to his purposes. He could easily overtake the raft. He threw the bow-line into the scow, shoved her off, and jumped in, under the first impulse which he had felt of vengeance against the Marshal.

He dropped the heavy sweeps between their thole-pins. The current pressed the bow outward, and he bent harder to his right-hand oar, thus to edge across, head on. Instantly he had vanished into the shoreless fog. The chop kept along with him, heaving, crazily rocking the scow; he seemed to be motionless, yet strongly as he rowed he knew that he was shooting downstream — ever farther out, ever closer to the humped white water that broke with a deadly, solemn pulse over the mid-channel reefs. All around, with a sound like frying meat, sizzled up bubbles of air churned under by the waters. Gail felt the strange, invisible land slipping, whirling up-river past him; visions of the unknown Torlina shore flashed through him, of smashing against the unscalable cliffs of canyons in the heart of the coast alps. Waves spurted up like tiny geysers, splashing him. Dark hummocks breasted past, with sudden, elusive gulplings; one or two shouldered fringes of convexed foam; a dizziness invaded his head, as if his body had been spinning in a circle. Breathless, he was dragging out his belly from those thole-pins, to the maddening creak of the ill-balanced sweeps. He could see only the splintery, weathered stern seat, the sandy, sloshing bilge water under it. . . . It was hope-

less to meet Blackwood in mid-river. But he might catch him after landing, and settle. . . .

Soon, on his right, a flattish shadow to which he had long been casting furtive glances, took on a harder immanence. He knew that it was not a rock, because, instead of rushing backward from him, it was slowly dropping downstream. He made out two blurs upon it — the raft! — human figures on their knees, their arms furiously thrusting paddles. Gail's heart leaped. He ceased his rowing to drop down upon them, as both entered a denser streak of fog. It veiled the raft before they sighted him, but he could still discern them, dim manikins frenziedly at work. The next instant he had crashed against their logs.

But the first blow was struck from them, binding the two crafts together. Before Gail could unship either heavy sweep, the Indian, coached by the Marshal, thumped his raised paddle on the gunwale, and dodged back. Blackwood's initial thrust met the thick handle of Gail's port oar.

Unequal as the silent, perilous contest was; and though envenomed by Jonesy's suicide, the thought of drawing his gun struck Gail as cowardly. He wanted only to seize the paddles, then cast the logs free. Yet at once this conflict of unwieldy wood became grotesque — an awkward, stagey thing. Blackwood, as if he realised his advantage in numbers, or feared the frailty of his craft, fought with a desperate bravery amazing to Gail, whose sweep had to bear the dual onslaught. The Indian at last winged Gail a glancing blow on his left temple. Feeling the warm trickle of blood there, he swung his great blade in an arc against Blackwood. It chugged upon his neck.

“Board her! Swamp him!” the Marshal screeched

to Vinegar, falling back with a cry of pain. But he himself lunged forward again the more savagely, this time flinging his arms about Gail's neck, while still holding the paddle in his hand. Taken unaware, Gail dropped the sweep, gripped Blackwood about the waist, and the two locked motionless for a moment. Gail felt the breath from his thin, distorted lips under their sleek hair, the flash of his blue-rimmed eyes. Scow and raft seemed to strain apart as they hung thus, from the shove given the latter by the obedient Indian, as he leaped over the boat's side, upon the stern seat.

But in doing so, Vinegar's weapon fell into the river; he was disarmed. With a thrill, Gail saw half his battle won. He relaxed his hold, grabbed wildly for the Marshal's paddle. Blackwood dodged, sank to his knees, and bracing himself between the logs, started in a torrent of curses to drag Gail over toward him. Helpless, Gail felt his body reaching further and further upon the boiling current; dimly in his stern he saw the Siwash recklessly hurling himself against the high sides of the scow, to capsize it. The sullen roar of a breaker plunging toward them broke upon his ears. The grind of existence seemed to slip a cog, and Gail thought with a grim, nauseous despair: "The immortality of others! Here's fighting for it — with a vengeance!"

But it was then, with a final wrench, that Gail squirmed his right hand free. He gripped the paddle tucked under Blackwood's arm. The Marshal snatched it back, releasing Gail's left. This he jerked toward him, and smote it, for the brace that he now alone lacked for advantage, against his gunwhale. Gail found that he could drag the man with him; and Blackwood, exhausted and surprised, weakened his hold. Gail did not

lose a second; his right hand tore away the paddle, which he shot down into the river. With the other, he dealt Blackwood a stinging blow in the eyes, and sliding from his embrace as if he had been oiled, tumbled backward, free, over the bow seat of the scow.

The Marshal collapsed, stunned, upon his logs, the two crafts swung apart; and instantly, with an obliterating thunder, there shouldered between them a smooth hill of flowing satin. Across its hanging ruff of foam, through its cool breath of destruction, Gail exulted as he saw the figure of the helpless Blackwood stagger to his feet, and the raft, speeded down the mill-race which the obstruction of the gaunt rock accelerated, vanish silently into the fog, helpless and doomed.

“Sweep! Ship your oar!” he called to the bewildered Vinegar, who, at the defeat of his employer, had limply ceased all effort.

The Siwash did so, taking the after seat, and they both began to pull strongly. But Gail did not yet breathe with relief. They shot into the raft’s boiling course. It whipped their bow uncontrolledly about; and Gail, shouting encouragement between his teeth, cursed to himself the fable of Indian dexterity. They grazed a boulder; their stern crashed in a side-swipe against another; but with the added power at the oars, they began to hold their own against the current, threading the maze of reefs and booming collars of spray. But soon their tumult weakened, and the fog appeared to darken. Ahead, on the Torlina shore, a titanic pinnacle wavered out upon their course; the mists were clearing; the scow breasted cleanly along a steep, gravel shore surmounted by huge cottonwoods, and cloying sand pressed up its bottom.

III

Gail leaped from the boat, wiping the trickle of blood from his cheek. He was at an immense drift-pile of gnarled roots and pale, skeleton trunks, forty yards beyond which the whole river seethed against the knife-edge of the cliff.

"Almost drown, I guess," shivered the spineless Indian, joining him and gazing thither.

"Who? Marshal?" retorted Gail impatiently, climbing the low cut-bank into the shadowy, saffron forest.

"No — I guess yes," said Vinegar with servile inconclusiveness, and the slight laugh of bravado with which the Indian always touches upon tragedy.

"Lamar — how far his cabin? You show me," said Gail.

But the Indian did not at once answer. At mention of the great man's name, he dropped back, reticent, sulkily; and Gail felt for the first time the fulness of Lamar's dominance, even over this savage. He repeated his words, as a command, but Vinegar only answered:

"This island. One more river. But can swim. . . . I think no good you see Lamar," he added sullenly.

Gail swore at the information and the opinion alike; but he had learned that in the North every labour accomplished is but half one's allotted task. They emerged at the inner shore of the island, upon a sheet of gurgling, glossy water, yet scarcely a hundred yards wide. Gail plunged into this side channel, and the Indian reluctantly followed. It was no more than waist-deep, and with chattering teeth they floundered out through a soft quicksand and into a thicket of dead willows.

"Lamar very far. One mile I think — no tlaill," Vinegar volunteered at length, taking the lead through the swampy jungle.

"You put me on the trail to his cabin," Gail ordered. "And then you beat it."

For an hour or more they threaded endless alders, past stagnant pools, edged by dead, exotic grasses; passed over sweetish, aromatic carpets of decaying balm-o'-gilead leaves, with the damp and ursine tang of the high bush cranberry in their nostrils. Finally the open flat gleamed ahead, its dishevelled canvas lean-tos close at hand, their poles sagging and askew, and beyond, squat, ruinous log-cabins that seemed to be sinking into the soil. Gail stumbled over a half-buried log, plunging forward upon a thing alive and warm; a dog. It sprang at him with a wolfish snarl, and recovering his feet, he booted the white beast, howling piteously, into the air. Immediately a pandemonium broke out. From behind stumps, from their silty wallows under cross-poles heavy with gutted salmon, stole forth a horde of skeleton-thin dogs, their short ears and bushy tails upright. They formed a semi-circle, advancing to surround Gail with piercing, enduring howls. He only held his ground, until he saw Vinegar beside him, shaking with hearty laughter. Then he charged the ring; and it retreated elastically, yet to advance again with the same defiant cowardice. Frowsy, human heads poked out from under their grimy canvases, with guttural shouts; arms hurled out empty tin cans, and the dog bedlam slowly lapsed into a cowed whining, a sneaking of furry forms back to their beds.

But Gail had waked the whole settlement, and surely Lamar. Still, he did not regret that. He had

been considering how he would approach the man. Ready as he was for an open fight, he shrank from ransacking his tent in the small hours, like a burglar.

"Lamar," said Vinegar, laconically, pointing inland to the far end of the flat; and then, to the last cabin at that edge of the clearing, "I go my fader, Attalota": and loped off thither with a *pfuk, pfuk*, of his moccasins in the light, black silt.

Gail was alone.

A tide of foreboding rose through his frame. The silver wafer of the late-setting moon shed a glaze upon the peaks, so sharp and black and near in the south, upon their inert, high glaciers. The stars swam reddish. Where the Siwash had pointed, he made out only a clump of popple, pale in the sombre sea of spruce, and started toward it. He passed shapeless mounds, dim depressions filled with tangled rose-bushes — forgotten habitations. A sense of the ancientness of this native settlement pervaded him. It had an air of peace and changelessness impossible in a whiteman's clearing; here was an unmarred record of the world from the remotest Then to Now. Here was the continuity of man, of generation to generation; immortality. And to what end? A shiftless indolence, impotence, decay. This flicker of life mocked at its fire in himself. Was the North inherently so cancelling? His boots trod the rich soil yieldingly.

At the edge of the aspen grove, Gail felt a sudden hunger, and remembered that he had eaten no supper. All the valley glittered, frostily. The air seemed curiously sensitive to sound, and dry sticks underfoot crackled inordinately loud. He had passed half way through the trees, when he saw a dim globe of light behind a long white wall. It was more than a tent;

canvas had been stretched upon a stiff frame, making a one-story house with a gable roof. This was joined on the right by a passageway, also of duck, to a square cabin of barked logs chinked with moss. Standing back at a distance in the grove, were two large army tents under flys, one of them lighted. The intruders were in possession of the dry-farmers' headquarters, for Gail read, burned on a board over the cabin's hidden door: "The Chyta Exploration Company."

With a twinge of anger at this, he nerved himself to stand his ground. Despite the glow through the wall, not a sound issued from within.

Then Gail knocked deliberately on the wooden cross-piece of the white door. It had a shining china knob.

"Hello —" came a voice. It was a woman's voice. Its lack of surprise at that hour of the night held Gail dumb. "Who is it? What do you want? Where are you from?" The words, approaching closer to the jamb, lowered into a whisper. They sounded nervous, apprehensive, yet in no way timid.

Wildly Gail's heart began to thump. He recognised the clear-cut, mellow voice. It was Clara's.

IV

There had thrilled him, before the surging tide of her personality, a sharp sense of the naked sex in there. Womanhood! — *her* womanhood — dominating the exquisite peril in which he stood; after these gruelling, too-vivid months, the first hint of feminine self-consciousness, of its oblique resources in defence. Gail felt himself awaking from a harsh, endless dream, filled with a reckless and bold enchantment that dimmed his high resolves, heightened his latent sensibilities. Then a hot-headed, overwhelming hunger seized him, to burst open

the door, declare himself, demand all of her. He fought to curb it.

He clenched his fists, took a steadying step backward. He strove to realise his responsibilities to them across the river. He could not enter until he knew who else was inside, who might be stirring in the tents behind. If he hid his identity a while, he might find out all that he wanted — about the judge's decision, her stand with Lamar. Then to burst in, and no matter!

He planned to thicken and deepen his voice, but before he could reply, she spoke again:

"You're a whiteman?"

"Yes. From across the river."

"From — John?" she hesitated, wistfully.

Gail was taken a-back. "John? Who — John?" he stammered.

"Hartline, of course," she retorted quickly. "Anyone ought to know that he and his gang are no friends of ours," she added with a guarded asperity.

She had not recognised him. For an instant this satisfaction utterly engrossed Gail.

"I'm from Blackwood, the Marshal," he proffered, cautiously. "I want to see Lamar."

"Go away, then. We're hardly anxious about Blackwood, either." Her tone was abrupt, withering. It was the Clara that he knew!

"He's lost — lost his paddles, and drifted down river. You know what that means on the Atna."

"Oh — oh!" There was pain in the cry, but it chiefly voiced the sex's blind reflex of nerve before tragedy. "Mr. Lamar isn't here," she continued after a pause, and with a trace of impatience. "He's gone down river, too. We're all packing up to follow. . . . But who *are* you?"

Her complacency irritated him. But with the final question, she gave a slight, persuasive, adventurous laugh. Indeed, it was the old Clara. And Gail not answering, she seized and turned the door-knob. He gripped and held it. Baffled, she only laughed again, banteringly, and withdrew her hand.

"Aren't you, really, from the dry-farmers? I wish—" she subdued her voice, solicitous; ended her sentence warily after a considering pause, "I only wish you were from them."

Gail started, fired by memories. She had said on the steamer that only loyalty to her betrothed had kept her from succouring the dry-farmers. There was Avery's news that she was acting "contrary" to Lamar. Could it be true that she had taken her stand against him?

"Well," he said daringly, "I am."

"Then you can tell me, about whether—" she broke out, eager, but again checked herself. "How much do you know, anyway?" she whispered.

Gail purposely prolonged the silence, in the hope of further admissions from her. He thrilled, protectively, to the double game she might be playing—and quite fearlessly, if convinced of its righteous ends, he knew.

"Are you alone in there?" he asked. "How many men in the other tents?"

"About fifteen. And all armed," she asserted, still on her guard. "Including"—her voice fell as with design, "Mr. Charles Lamar."

"You contradict yourself. He's gone down the Atna, you said."

"I know I do, but —"

Gail felt her hesitation fix a tie between them.

"Then you're not siding with him?" he quickly

followed his advantage, warming to the clever indirection with which she had revealed and covered her attitude.

She did not answer, but her silence was admission enough for Gail. Burning with joy, his hands shot out toward the knob, but a question from her stayed him.

"If you're really one of the Hartlines, and the Marshal's raft is gone — how did you cross the river?"

"Who else could I be? There's only our two outfits within a hundred miles of here."

"Except those mountain-climbers," she interposed. "And I guess they're lost."

Gail strained his ears to catch any wave of dejection in her tone. But he discerned none. Why should there be, before a total stranger, in one so self-controlled?

"I took the census-man's boat," he said. "And I've got to return it. He'll need it coming from Scolai Pass."

"Ah," she breathed, as in satisfaction, adding with her puzzling laugh, "Oh, no, he won't. How could he get back from the Scolai before winter? You don't know this country, do you? He didn't cross the Atna to count any Siwash noses. I sent him."

The letter he had given John flashed through Gail. No doubt now about her stand! He conceived a new respect for the pompous census man, at least as an actor.

"Why don't you let me see you?" she persisted.

For the fraction of a second it pierced Gail that all the time she knew who he was; was playing him for a show-down. It would be like her.

"I'd run too big a risk," evaded Gail, "with Lamar so close."

"Then what *do* you want?" she harked back.

Gail assembled his wits. But was he not sure of her? "To find out the Court's decision," he declared. "About who gets Torlina."

A prolonged wait followed. Then from Clara, decisively: "I don't know that. Charley's had the papers locked here in his safe. He knows, but he won't tell me. Our plan is to withdraw down river, and wait till you people cross. Can you figure what that might indicate, whether the verdict's for or against John?"

Again—"John."

"That might mean either way. But possession is all ten points of the law in this country. Still, if the decision is against us, why wouldn't you all stay here?"

"Wait a minute." Gail heard her step back from the door, and then a metallic jar, the rustle of papers. He held his breath.

"Everything in here's upside down," she whispered, returning. "But if you want to come in and look, I think the papers are in the black tin box at the right end of the draughting table. It's unlocked, but I hadn't time to make them out."

"Good!" he raised his voice excitedly. "I'm coming—"

"Sh! Sh!" she murmured. "Not so loud. You'll wake him."

Gail's bosom froze.

"Wake—wake whom?" he gasped. Was it all a trap?

"Our surveyor, Lindsey. He's sleeping in here."

"What's John Hartline to you?" Gail demanded, fiercely, grasping at a straw.

"You, one of the dry-farmers, don't know?" she retorted, half-mockingly. "Still, John always was too cautious, or ashamed of me lately. I thought he'd

be coming back with Avery, after my message was delivered. We could have met like this, perhaps for the last time." Her voice trembled with feeling. Gail could not believe his ears. "You see, it's safe enough. I stayed up after packing, and then when the dogs howled, I thought of course he'd come, considering he is my —" Her voice caught.

A blaze of understanding lighted Gail's eyes. For quite a minute he could not speak.

"Brother?" he muttered. "*You* — John's sister?"

"Why, yes — of course. I only found him this summer. But get away. Look out for yourself. Someone's coming. It's Charley. He's awake, and must have heard us. He can't find us here together."

Gail gripped his overturned senses. This, then, was John Hartline's tragedy! Clear now was all his suppressed fervour, his irresolution to strike at the enemy, shielded, perhaps, by his own kin.

And Clara between them, caught by the passions of the North, in the bond of loyalty to Lamar on one side, to her flesh and blood on the other. Ever steadfast, according to her nobler lights. He would trust her.

Gail heard footsteps, both advancing and retreating along the passageway. Not a word was uttered as they passed there. Then, in the tent, a bluff voice called, "Phil!" and there was a wiry, flexible creaking, as of bed-springs.

Had she gone, had he lost all chance to behold, to claim her? Hardly knowing what he did, Gail wrenched the white knob, flung open the door, and strode into the canvas house.

CHAPTER XIII

CLARA

I

AT once, the light quite blinded him. Gradually, in the astonished silence of two pairs of eyes, of two human forms, Gail discerned a long table covered with blue-prints, brass instruments, leather cases. It rose from a disorder of open boxes, valises, khaki clothing, fire-arms leaning against the walls, collapsible camp-chairs. In its middle, a glass lamp with roses painted on the shade cast its light on a square, japanned box with a handle in the top. Matting covered the board floor. It was all like a city office; it had an air of settled importance, which after Gail's stern existence in the opens cowed and dazed him.

Not Lamar, but Lindsey, the secretary, standing on the far side of the table, first fixed Gail's sight over the lamp. Its glow struck upward upon the lines and shadows of an angular, palish face, large eyes behind thin glases fixed to a thread of gold chain, a head almost bald, a countenance that seemed hollow and ascetic. But though Alaska had not even tanned him, the cords of his young neck, vanishing into a brown sweater faced with a blue "S," showed a lithe muscularity. He had just risen from the blankets of the woven wire cot behind him. Yawning, he lit the calabash pipe in his hand, deferred a self-effacing glance toward Lamar, and picking up a pair of dividers, leaned over one of the blue-prints.

"You want to see me? How did you get in here?" came in a thick early-morning huskiness from Gail's left. Lamar's stocky bulk seemed squeezed into the home-made easy-chair that was backed with a strip of duck. He was a strong man with red, bristling hair, a bulbous nose, and dressed in blue serge. He was big, but not beefy.

"I'm back from Mt. Lincoln," Gail managed to enunciate. "I hear people thought we were lost." He wanted, by startling the man, to extend the pause, in order to study him. His stoutness was the sort that is all fibre; his redness insisted vitality. Puttees cased his well-shaped yet piano legs, and a snake-skin belt cut a furrow into his trim but protruding stomach. The head of shoe-brush hair was square, all but flat on top. The North had burned and mottled his full cheeks, had shrunk to mere embossed scars what surely had been purses under his acute greenish eyes. These, and his air of aggression held in reserve, more than the colour of his hair, gave the lie to a Hebrew aspect inherent in his nose and bulk. Gail judged that while vanity, even self-indulgence, might claim him in civilisation, his physique enabled him to forgo them easily in Alaska, and revel in its arduous life.

"With Snowden's son — John T.'s boy, eh?" he said, eyeing the matting, in a tone that evinced pride in the acquaintanceship. "Bob's always been a credit to the old man," he added with ironic candour. A sort of cat-that-swallowed-the-canary smile crept over his face, as he glanced up toward his clerk, Lindsey.

"Yes," asserted Gail. But he felt tongue-tied, too aware of the fresh wound on his temple.

"What in thunder is a man like you up to such foolishness for?" exclaimed Lamar with sudden emphasis,

after scrutinising him narrowly. He settled himself in the chair with a hulking movement. Gail noted that neither what had become of Bob, or whether they had reached the summit of the mountain, appeared to interest him.

"He died, and I went on to the top alone," declared Gail, with an impulsive idea that Lamar was the sort whose confidence an easy frankness would win.

Lindsey started and dropped his compasses; but Lamar only concentrated his gaze. "Accident of course?" he asked bluntly. "I hope you'll convince this Marshal of ours so." He paused. "If you can't, come to me. That boy'd never amount to anything in this country. He was no good, anyhow. I guess John T. can be let down easy."

His brutality was revolting. And he showed neither awe nor incredulity over Gail's feat. In simple loyalty to Bob, Gail stirred to protest his disgust. But he only said, with a grim ease:

"I've seen Blackwood. He called me a murderer." Gail's muscles set automatically.

"Did he?" snorted Lamar, whether threateningly, or in contempt for Blackwood's opinion, Gail could not make out.

"And a lot of use that was," declared Gail, aroused. "The Marshal's just lost his paddles, and drifted down river on Vinegar Bill's raft."

He expected to move the man, at least; but not even surprise shadowed his ruddy face. He only opened his mouth upon Gail, uttered a dry chuckle, and slapped his knee.

"That'll save us a dollar or two, hey, Phil?" he asked genially of Lindsey. An added loathing filled Gail. The secretary forced a wan smile, hunched

his shoulders, with the hint of a shudder, and without looking up from his drawings, put in —

“But you weren’t going to pay him that last hold-up, anyhow.”

“I wasn’t. But I was thinking of future ‘touches,’ so long as we have a soft-mouth like him in the country,” said Lamar with sly seriousness. “Yet it is a hard end if he drowns, though his getting his job of me was the only case of these time-serving Alaskans pulling the wool over my eyes. And he made a good deal with those cartridges of Hartline’s, buying off Guiteau.” He turned to Gail. “Now there’s the man this country needs, if you could start him right. He sees things reasonably, Tom Guiteau does.”

“But it was Tom that showed up Blackwood to Hartline,” broke out Gail, angered. “The Marshal knew all right you’d thrown him, and tried to warm up to the dry-farmers. They made it pretty hot for him. And he was the cur returning to his vomit, when I got him in the middle of the Atna and took away his paddles.”

Gail checked himself with a flush of fear. His indignation at Lamar’s callousness had driven his native honesty too far. He was giving away his game, recklessly, as John had said that Ireson would. The magnate lurched forward at him with a twitch of his wide mouth. Gail tightened his fingers, and waited with a sinking heart for him to speak.

“They called any bluff of Blackwood’s, eh? I thought so,” he said with a covert shrewdness; then, harshly, “You’re one of the Hartlines?”

“Yes.” Gail’s jaw set, meeting the challenge. “I crossed in the old census-taker’s boat.”

“And lied to me about young Snowden.” Lamar had started uncomfortably at the reference to Avery.

"Well, you've got an easy welcome here — so far. We didn't expect any of you over till our legal officer got back."

There was a silence. Lamar's out-thrust features remained immobile, fixed upon Gail. But his small eyes contracted, and Gail braced himself to such a penetrative searching of his whole being as life had never before inflicted.

At least, the magnate was not wondering whether Vinegar Bill had floated away with Blackwood, nor could he guess how Jonesy's end had heightened the encounter in mid-river.

Gail wrestled with his fury at the charge of lying. Lindsey coughed with a modest ostentation.

II

"So you men think that you can open up Alaska, do you?"

Lamar wiped a big hand across his face, and settled back in the chair. Abruptly his manner changed. He did not question the motives of Gail's visit. He ceased to bristle. He spoke defensively.

"Now you listen to me, young man."

Tom's temptation and yielding flashed through Gail. Did Lamar think that he had another mark?

He began to argue, in an even, cheery voice at first. He had to have this Torlina townsite, or the thousands of dollars that his backers had paid for copper claims, for railroad surveys, for coal leases, was thrown away. Otherwise he would be cheating them. They had taken his word. This admitted of no question.

He, personally, didn't care who owned the place, or for his own success in winning it. He was only the agent of a power behind him, back East. But this force

was money, organised and world-wide, magnificent. Its works were the measure of civilisation. It was futile for anyone to oppose it; for anything to stem it was as hopeless as "to shove over Mt. Lincoln." Why, Alaska, so important in the eyes of these prospectors, was but a passing incident, a straw in the grip of that power; they who wielded it were hardly aware of Alaska's existence. The development of the North was the work of their left hand, a charity, a favour to the nation. It involved evil, even suffering, of course. The travail of wealth always must.

He was plausible and fair. His tone was neither oily nor presumptuous. He was persuasive.

Gail listened, absorbed, a bit bewildered. He had never before confronted such a man; one of those strong, sleek beings, upon whom converged the dreams and mortifications alike of that multitude on First Avenue, Seattle. He was the focus of that proud, relentless city. He was the key, both there and in Alaska, to all the panorama of living that had stirred Gail to love, to pity, and to hate, since his release from Lena. Lamar should be its explanation.

"My boy. I see these things through this man Hartline's eyes, as well as you do," he said. "No one could sympathise with his partners more strongly than I do. And I'm no more to blame for wiping them out than you are. So what's the good of resistance?" He spoke with resignation, as if humbly bending to powers and abilities far greater than his own. He expressed a sincere pity.

And his body seemed to exhale these forces which he cited. Gail found himself trying to gauge them.

Men like the dry-farmers could never inherit the North. It was the dominion of great capital. But this

was no more than Tom had said. Lamar seemed only to tap his truths at a deeper source, and express them without Tom's scathing lightness.

But he uttered not a word as to right. He did not once mention justice. And gradually his voice began to lose its geniality. A cold hardness crept into it. Slowly his kindly ease evaporated. Gail thought of the indifference which he had evinced toward Bob and Blackwood. The man had been oblivious of that. There was something at bottom *cruel*. . . .

Gail's eyes wandered to a round nickel shaving mirror, fixed to a wooden rib of the tent over Lamar's head. Then to the tin box on the right of the lamp; to Lindsey, glancing upward now and then, with the look of a confirming, faltering disciple. Gail could see his own dark features and their slant eyebrows in the looking-glass.

"As for my own stake, I'm only looking to the future," said Lamar. "I have my kids to provide for, the same as you boys. And I believe in the survival of them that *do* survive."

True! Clara had said he was "a man, too," though the copper trust was his God. And Gail thought: "If this capable vitality of his were only wielded for the good of men like the dry-farmers! Could they but command such forces as backed Lamar — for the right. Might a man of his primitive power be enlisted in the just conquest of the Youngest World! Why must so dominant a spirit be in league with evil?"

Then Lamar began to talk about the Government's hand in his affairs. He praised it, patronisingly. But often it had hypocritically opposed him. He had outwitted it, and Washington had shrivelled before the divinities behind him. He told how he had "managed" courts, appointed deputies. He boasted.

All this was the might which had degraded Tom, the hot-headed, defiant, independent; and indirectly, through the craven Blackwood. That somehow was a measure of Lamar's power. It was appalling — infernal. . . . Something sinister, noxious, lurked in the air of the tent. Now and then he broke his overbearing monotone with a desolating laugh. It resounded, throaty — brutal. His thick face set; his small eyes sharpened, snapping with suspicion. Gail's heart sickened. Never had such a ferment gulfed him.

He pulled himself together with the reflection: "Does he think that he's carrying me with him? . . . Why, he's only hanging himself!"

Gail pictured him in a Seattle sky-scraper, or back East, commanding from a leather chair, amid brass and mahogany. He saw those stooping, hairy youths across the river, reading their letters from home in the firelight, hurling them into the embers at Ireson's challenge. He saw Mease passing about his photograph of the tired wife in black alpaca. . . . All their four years of struggle and privation — their toil, their lies mailed home. That four years of faith and suffering in Kingdom. . . .

But Lamar was right. *All that he said was true.* And it was this truth that moved Gail to a bitter and consuming hate. . . . Lamar blocked the enduring life of others. And Bob had decreed when to kill. . . .

But the big, red man here was only the tool of the juggernaut, of that distant, inexorable force which Gail felt throbbing through the tent, which had ruined Hartline and the boys, degraded Blackwood, Tom. . . . Only the cat's paw, the instrument. Yet without him, the juggernaut was powerless; its heart would be dead; its corroding poison words and water. Without him,

that cancer which had destroyed pioneering, which was eating through the Youngest World, was pulp. . . . Without his strong body sitting there, like the cave-man that he was, defying Life, and all the Future. . . .

"So what are you after over here?" ended Lamar, with a complacent weariness. "What do you men want?"

It was all unreal. Gail was not in Alaska. He was standing somewhere in a dream.

"Bread! Bread!" he broke out harshly. "For their starving wives and kids."

The room of canvas danced around him. The blue maps, the lamp with the painted roses, swam in his eyes.

"Then name your price," growled the magnate. "We don't give flour away in this country, even to Siwashes. What's Hartline's lay?" His voice seemed to come from far away.

Gail controlled himself. He felt that he shouted, yet he knew that he lied without a quaver: "Only this: Half the crowd went out to the coast this summer and packed in cartridges for the ones you stole, by that mountain-climber's trail. The twenty of them'll be over here by daylight, unless —"

Lamar's self-possession was perfect. His gaze did not even flinch. "Unless what?" he said, icily. "Unless I show you the Court's decision that Blackwood brought into camp last night?"

"That's it," said Gail, amazed at his own calmness.

"Well, they won't find me here," he laughed drily. "They're welcome to their cabin. We're pulling off down river at daylight."

"Then the verdict's against you?" Time seemed to stand still.

"The decision? Yes." Lamar spoke gloomily, in a

hushed voice. Gail's heart leaped. For an instant he believed. Was not this in line with what Clara had revealed?

"Man — what's the matter with you?" were the next words that Gail heard. "You're as white as these walls. . . . Have some coffee? . . . Lindsey, go and tell them in the tents."

He saw the lean secretary edge around the table, disappear down the canvas-covered tunnel. . . . Clara! Would she return?

"I guess I'd better wake the boys, too," said Lamar. "To finish this packing. It's almost daylight."

He arose and strode past Gail, ignorantly, with a brusque, intent heaviness, leaving him alone.

Surely the Indians owned other rafts. Out of there, across the river with his news! He had succeeded, and without a fight. . . . Yet he could not stir a muscle. He had not begun to win his consuming purpose. Not even seen Clara! He stared around the tent, and his eyes fell on the tin box. Suppose that Lamar had lied to him? Gail thought of the man's long, studied speech, and his gorge rose again. No. The two things did not match: Lamar's withering assurance, and this favourable verdict — this haste in breaking camp. He had been tricked.

Gail tiptoed over to the japanned box, and raised the cover. Right on top, unfolded, face up, with its red seal and dark green typewriting full in the lamp-light, lay the judge's words. He devoured the heavy, guarded sentences. Slowly they sank into his brain. . . . Lamar had told the truth.

He stared, bewildered, fascinated, at the blunt and potent page. It was unbelievable. Surely there was a retraction, a qualification, somewhere. He lifted the

document, turned it over to look on the other side. And as he did so, another sheet, underneath it, caught his eyes. The paper was the same, but the writing was penned, in a flourishing hand with purple ink — and the straight words lashed him:

VALDEZ, Sept. 9th, '03.

Dear Charley:—

The enclosed verdict is rendered according to the facts, but get wise to the joker. You will see that I give Hartline possession on his old homestead deeds. Now, I have just received this ruling from the Seattle Land Office: The winners of the suit must re-file their location papers at the Valdez Office within 48 hours. Failing that, the tract is open again. I have copied their original papers, and hold them here for your signature.

Yours, etc.,

DONELSON —“J.”

Gail's jaws ground together. So that was the treachery! The despoiling juggernaut speaking from headquarters! He felt the skin upon his temples pucker, and all his pulses start to pound. The cynic shamelessness of the quoted “Judge!” Gail beheld his haggard face in the little shaving mirror, his high, flaming cheekbones, the black hollows of his eyes.

He seized the paper, crumpled it into his pocket. Time still remained for John to hit the Valdez trail ahead of them. No wonder Lamar was pulling out; not down the river, of course; that was a blind, but out to the court, since the forty-eight hours were long past. It must be a race.

There was a creaking sound behind him, approaching, on the boards of the passageway. It ceased abruptly. Gail was conscious of a human presence, and his heart seemed to crowd into his throat. Still staring into the mirror, he caught sight over his left shoulder of Clara's hard, bright animal eyes, her oval face, dark with

health, but strangely lined. Wisps of vapour floated across it. She carried a steaming coffee-pot. He felt a dissolving, overpowering passion. Now — or never — for his destiny. . . .

Transfixed, Gail murmured her name. Again, and once more, "Clara — Clara!"

"Gabriel! . . . Save us. . . ."

The face had gone. Light steps pattered, receding down the canvas tunnel. Gail's hand was still on the open cover of the box. She had come to warn him. He blessed her. And their eyes had met. She knew that he was here, alive and well. Enough, for the moment! No power now could keep them apart.

Gail dropped the tin cover, but its snap-to was drowned by a cry and a crash in the passage. A thumping of heavy footsteps, a roar — "You hound of hell!" — and a fist blow from behind, in the small of Gail's neck, tumbled him forward headlong upon the matting. He struggled to rise, against lunging arms, against a satanic red face, and the wiry, fire-eyed Lindsey. He was gaining his feet, loosening the thickset fingers from his throat, when, with redoubled oaths, the men pinioned both his fists. At first he had struck back frenziedly, goaded to fury by the touch of their flesh, with a lustful joy in the fight; but soon, having such odds against him, Gail saw the folly of inviting a knock-out or maiming that would keep him from reaching the river.

He stalled; and for a second Lamar's gross, fiendish jowls, his hot and spluttering lips, wavered distorted. With a flash Gail read the pair's purpose to bind and keep him a prisoner. He braced every sinew in his frame, thrust the last atom of his strength into a mad break for freedom. And thinking that Gail had yielded,

their grip had weakened. He slid through it, struggled past them, flung himself down the canvas tunnel. He kicked the coffee-pot that they had knocked from Clara's hands. To the left, an opening led toward the two tents. But it was filled with moving, shouting forms aroused by the scuffle. So trapped, Gail plunged straight ahead, and threw his body against the heavy door of the dry-farmers' cabin.

It gave with him. He fell into darkness, stumbled over a big open box, and hurled the timbers of the door closed upon the stampeding footsteps. Groping, his fingers closed on an iron bolt above the wooden latch. He shot the bolt to safely.

III

Gail caught his panting breath. Outside, silence succeeded the shuffling of feet. A single fist banged upon the boards, as if testing his security. Then Lindsey's high, precise voice:

"It was she that told him where those papers were, through the door before he came in. I had no chance to warn you before. They thought I was asleep, and I was at first."

Lamar broke into vile, burly oaths at his reticence. "And damn her! That's the last I stomach. I'll fix the woman. Now, you keep her off while we hold him."

All hope, everything, was lost. His manhood was defeated, his life — blasted. Despair and darkness welled through his soul, numbing even his fury. At the moment of victory, he, too, had failed, like Bob and all the rest.

Yet had he? In the depths of his being, gleamed one faint, cheering light. The North had been the touchstone of his prayers, and transformed *her*;

through John or not, no matter; the land had won her from Lamar, won her fire and her conscience for justice and the right, for him. And some day the right must triumph, irresistibly, inevitably, however far from her he should be, or dead his aching heart. Only blindly he gritted his teeth to shield her now from the menace of that brute.

He heard the men withdraw toward the army tents with vindictive mutters, and understood why they did not force an entrance. Trapped and guarded in the cabin, he was as good as bound hand and foot from warning his partners — while Lamar hit the Valdez trail.

Gail stared around the darkness of his prison. Dimly he began to make out its store of truck: axe-handles and pick-heads, upturned sleds and travoys with rusty runners; a gasolene engine, sawbuck saddles, broken bales of hay, and the large whitish skins of lynxes dangling from the roof. There was a smell of tar, of dried animal tissue and soil decayed in darkness. The day was dawning. A crowbar leaned against the logs opposite the door, and, high above it, Gail saw a small window barred with iron rods. Through them filtered a sick, slaty glow, and his eyes fell on the open box that he had tripped over. It held sawdust, through which showed thin ribs of the same stuff, but agglutinated. He picked one out, a stick of dynamite such as long ago he had used at work on the Sequalmie flume. This was likely dangerously old. A sudden wonder at why a moment before it had not obliterated him with a roar and blankness, was blackened by a hideous thought. Why not end all so, at once? More squarely than Jonesy, life had downed him. Perhaps such was the death that Bob and old Lincoln ordained when charity

did not avail. His toward the dry-farmers had not. . . . One harder kick. . . . With flaring eyes, Gail raised a foot above the sawdust drum-sticks: fate was in league with them.

Then he laughed, and heartily.

No! His forehead and hands grew slimy and cold with sweat. Yet no thought of right or wrong, of life as a sacred trust, had withheld him. The idea of suicide was the pole most opposite to his whole creed of being. Survival — indeed by brutish, despoiling forces — but survival of the stronger self, for his undying ends, was the axiom of all Gail's striving. Self-murder was the one outlawed act. He told himself that he had not been tempted; that his saving laugh had been stirred by the sardonic hindsight that he had not fought Lamar and Lindsey, as all his brain and fibres cried out that he should have done, even been killed by their heelers. That were better than this impotence.

Staring at the box, Gail saw beside it a small pasteboard of detonators. A thought entered him, routing this despicable pondering. Hungry and exhausted as he was, he smiled up at the grated window; and the idea seemed borne through it upon the pale, growing light, with the flabby-throated "*qua-ook! qua-ook!*" of ravens swinging outside. This dynamite was Hartline's; Lamar could not know of its existence. Well, even if the boys had no way to cross the Atna and hear of that Judge's infamy, at least Gail might signal that he was in the thick of their battle. And perhaps escape to the river in the smoke and uproar. Anyway, this was the last chance. He thrilled to it. He piled three empty condensed milk crates under the window, mounted them, lifted the crowbar, and set to work upon the iron rods.

He muffled both with sacking, to smother sound while he was prying. This he did slowly, warily; and the bars were fixed in as if welded to the logs. He heard the furtive tread of those who guarded him outside the cabin; an axe chopping; the jangle of horse-bells and clink of hobbles, as the men with deep, urging voices rounded up the packtrain. He worked, as he had not since buried by the snowslide with Bob, until sweat and blood ran down from his cut. It was an endless job. He felt faint, certain that he was too late, when finally, unnoticed, he had bent the last rods inward, and the flat was blazing in the September sunlight. Through the grove he could see Attalota's cabin, where Vinegar Bill had gone. But he still heard the fitful clang of bells, as from a waiting packtrain. Why had it not started? What was the delay?

He jumped down, fitted caps to three of the sticks from the box, hurled them through the window. There was a deafening reverberation, an upheaval; and Gail climbed nimbly through the sudden darkening oblong of dust, dropping down the logs. His feet squared upon the ground in the brief instant of ensuing silence. Then, as he started running toward the river, through the cloud yellowed by the sun, the tumult arose; first in a burst of howling from the dogs, like a pack of prodded wolves, and the pursuit was on. Cries and curses, the beat of footsteps, swelled behind him. As he emerged into the open flat, he saw the wolf-dogs, scenting a forage after devastation, tearing about the swale, white and grey flashes close to the ground; and in their van, through the drifting dust, the running forms of Siwashes from the startled settlement. They were now his one hope, to mingle with them for cover, to lose himself in the brush along shore. The yelling gang was

closing in. A shot rang out, and the *tsung* of a bullet whipped past Gail's head. He was opposite Attalota's cabin, in a lingering eddy of smoke. With a sudden impulse, he dodged aside and plunged against the door. A rotten thong snapped, and he was inside, under the half-darkness of the sagging ridge-pole.

He saw no one at first, as he softly refastened the rawhide latch. At least Vinegar was not there, and his heart rose, hearing also his pursuers sweep on past, and their cries sink toward the Atna. Then his swimming head grew aware of a surrounding squalor; of rotting fish, and the decay of innumerable, aged garments. The grimy logs were hung with the jetsam of the wilderness, a museum of the savage's childishness: old flint locks, stubby Russian guns with bulging stocks, curved and inlaid with tarnished silver, modern 30-40s — a downright arsenal; broken crockery, watch and clock works, queerly curved knives with gut-lashed handles, T-shaped axes, snowshoes tufted with red worsted, rusted steel traps — picked up in the last hundred years from all over Alaska, in forests, on wrecks in the Arctic, and gathered here through the North's free-masonry in trade and "potlatch."

At one end of the cabin, a rusty stove was set in the pounded earth under a small window of bear-bladder which was opaque, Gail noted with relief. And then, from a bench along one wall, where it ended at the stove, under a heap of wild sheep skins, greasy blankets and old gunny-sacks, there was a stir, and Gail discerned a pair of watery red eyes glittering. The head of a very old man was lifted. It was the face of a mummy; his hair was so long and grey, his cheeks so furrowed and scarred, that he might have been of any race. What once had been brown overalls covered his skeleton lower

limbs, now showing through the frayed cloth like thin polished wood. Above, a short, glossy frock coat hung from his bony shoulders. As he stood up, shivering and muttering to himself, a sort of scapula around his neck danced on his bare and sunken chest.

"Attalota *hiyu* cold. Attalota *scoo* good. Attalota big Siwash," he maundered to himself, oblivious of the explosion. This was his only recognition of the whiteman, and made as if to distract his own surprise. Then he retched consumptively, stroked his thin, snowy goatee, and, kneeling on the mildewed earth, opened the grate of the stove, and began to whittle shavings from a little stick.

Gail gasped and nodded in reply, seating himself on the bench. He realised instinctively that this old man could be no partisan of Lamar's. For the moment he was safe, and though still a captive and effectively no nearer the river, he had given his enemies the slip.

When the shavings began to crackle, and the smoke to ooze from the rust-pores in the stove, Attalota whipped about upon Gail, and said with a shrill vigour: "Jesus-man —* One he come here some day. He tell, 'Bimeby you *die* — die. Head, bones, arms, legs'" — he slapped them each, swiftly, with both hands — "'go down into earth — dirt — *so!*'" He beat the soil with his palms. Then, rising majestically, and lowering his voice to a grandiloquent quaver, "'Bimeby, long time, *ver'* long time — all flow together. Make man again! Rise up! Live! . . . Man-y, man-y, snow. Up there — sky.'" He waved both arms toward the smoky rafters. "You think so, eh?" An avid, violent intentness seized on his voice. "You think so — you?" He jabbed three lean fin-

* Missionary.

gers at Gail, and waited for a reply, with stained lips idiotically opened upon his blackened and snagged teeth.

"That's what they think, all of them," said Gail, but with a flush of reverence for the outcast old savage, grasping the doctrine which Gail had come to resent, as robbing from his own vision of unending life its valour and brave responsibility. "And maybe it's true. I—I don't know."

"True?" echoed Attalota, with vehement scorn, his rat eyes streaming. "I think he lie! I think Jesus-man all big lie. I think *hell*!" He hissed his words with a pagan fanaticism, and then burst into a suppressed, whispering laughter, which drew his crinkled skin into hideous and tight concentric cords. At once, as Gail's heart warmed at his earnestness, these loosened, and he added solemnly:

"I think man—woman—live only by man follow man, squaw to baby. Hey? What you think? . . . Man never die so."

Gail cast him a veiled, astonished look. He sprang to his feet, began pacing up and down the cabin. What right had this savage, now, to remind him? The man's penetration, his simple wisdom, here, at this pivotal moment of the West's strife for survival, of all its creating and destroying ardour! . . . Gail gripped himself, and pausing, with a motion as if to slap him on the back, exclaimed, "You're all right—Mike." But the old fellow's mouth only continued its soft, chattering laughter, as he filled his broken teapot and slid it upon the stove.

Abruptly Gail stood still. Again he heard the distant clink of horse-bells, and the sound fixed the resolve that had slowly been possessing him. He would break

for the river, now that the chase was over. It might not yet be too late? And had he not crossed to fight?

But as he turned to the door, one of Attalota's bony hands drew back Gail's arm. With the other, the old man dragged from under a moose hide a tin plate of big, seeded rose-hips, then a salmon bladder, from which he poured a viscous green oil over the fruit. He stuck a spoon in the mess and proffered it with a gracious, ceremonial air. But even Gail's hunger rebelled, and he shook his head. Then, still holding him, the Siwash produced a side of dried salmon, hard as mahogany, crusted with white blow-fly eggs. This he tore with his teeth, grinning and smacking his withered lips, and was handing it to Gail, when the dull gut window pane was darkened by a shadow. Gail held his breath. There was a sound on the threshold. The thong creaked and strained. The door opened with a wrench.

She was standing there, wide-mouthed; with a gaze at once shrinking and triumphant.

IV

"Clara!"

Breathless, they held themselves in check.

Then Gail plunged forward, riven by dismay, and an overwhelming, unspeakable relief.

Clara raised an arm, and at last found speech.

"You should have told me through the tent, if you knew me then," she said, refastening the door. "You should have trusted me, after you heard I stood with John. I owned Phil Lindsey once, and could have choked his mouth about the strong-box. We could have crossed the river with those papers then. It was too late when I saw you in the mirror."

"Don't — don't reproach me." Gail's head fell.

"Too much was at stake to risk. Let me explain — I wasn't sure —"

"Of me? . . . I don't reproach you." She cast him an assuring smile. "Never, Gail. I think I understand."

Their eyes met. But all the wonder and surmise that crowded upon their brains, stirred by the intervening months, could not blot the more vivid issue of their present peril.

"What's their delay in pulling out for Valdez?" He looked up. "Tomorrow'll be too late for us to reach John, even if Lamar's men don't find us."

How her alert gaze had widened, the tawny somnolence of her pupils, pinpoints no longer, steadied! Her alluring pallor aboard the *Seward*, the sharpness of feature, had given way to the soft tan of health, a calm poise, a maturer fulness. She, like Tom and himself, had been stimulated in flesh and spirit by the ordeals of the land; she had lost the abstraction and impulsiveness that in their first communion had almost jeopardised her self-mastery. How could he ever have compared her with the fragile Martha! A new firmness in her straight mouth, one quizzical line that slanted between her brows, attested how the victory in her inner struggles had changed her, had reached deep into her soul.

"They won't start yet for Valdez," she broke the silence. "They've lost three horses, and couldn't pull out till tomorrow. Besides, John and the boys have no rafts to come over on, and Charley says they wouldn't build them before hearing from you. In the row, he let slip about the Judge's letter." Her voice hardened.

"I was just going to break," said Gail wildly, ran-

cling at that recollection, "to cross somehow, when you came."

"Don't, Gail — don't yet. I knew you'd take any chance. That's why I did, too, and found you. Vinegar Bill's with them, and swears he saw you hide in the brush. They're patrolling the river for miles up and down. You'd sure be caught, and they've sworn to kill, sooner than let you cross it."

Gail's look had wandered to her wrists. He saw two red scars circling them. He seized one; the blood had dried there.

His gorge mounted to bursting. "The fiend!" he choked.

"It was only Charley's orders," she panted. "He'll have enough yet to suffer for. The men tied me to a saw-horse in the bunk-tent. I kicked a knife toward me, and used it in my teeth. That made the gash."

"It was *your* risk coming here," averred Gail, with a hot awe. "Your life's as worthless as mine, to be found with me."

"I know. But where better, Gabriel, than with you — I've thought from that first instant on the steamer. 'The one man to help me solve —' I said then. The one being who might make me see clearer, save me from Charley and his despoiling. You and the country have; faith in you has carried me through everything."

Her old spell was overpowering. All Gail's fibres clamoured to possess her. She did not stand supine. His arms folded around her. Their bodies met in a long, warm embrace. Their lips touched. He smoothed her hair from his eyes.

The thunder of his heart obliterated the begrimed

cabin, and for a delectable, giddy space they seemed to stand alone, away upon some far windy tundra.

"And I almost upset the apple-cart," she murmured, with a flash of her old banter, "by showing how much I liked you on that voyage."

"You loved from the first? It was I—I," he murmured; then, with sudden courage, "Clara!" and released her, as if under a twinge of conscience.

"The night in my stateroom you had a right to mistake. . . ."

"No," said Gail, gravely. "I have no rights at all with you. I'm not free. I'm still married. I'd—forgotten."

At first hardly grasping his meaning, she gave an adventurous laugh, averting her head also. Then he saw her quiver, dynamically, with passion opposing her self-control. She recovered herself slowly, shrinking from him.

"Don't say forgotten. . . . Because *I've trusted*. . . ."

He gulped. "It's a long story, Clara."

She lifted a hand to her forehead, as if against a glare.

"Wait. Don't tell me here," she whispered in a moment, faintly, yet with the dominant decision he remembered. "After this show-down, if we're both honest, you must be free some day. If not, then it's to be—" her tone thickened, "*my* forgetting. . . . If I can't give you my faith now, I never will. . . . So shall I?"

"You can." Gail's teeth set.

"Then what odds, if we have the courage of our love and our beliefs?"

She raised her moist eyes and saw that his high

cheeks were scarlet. Yet against his warm breath, not the smallest muscle of her solemn countenance stirred. Their gaze hung entwined, shyly glad, world-effacing. And as Gail heard her heart-beats mount, it shamed him to think how more dire the battle in her bosom might be beside that in his own.

"We'll try the river tonight," he ripped out all at once.

"Yes, the chances are best at dark," she agreed, with a practical intensity. "There still may be time enough to warn John and the boys. At least we'll be together if they shoot."

"If I don't get over to warn them — well, life would be hopeless," confessed Gail, with a resolute dejection. "All I want of it, besides you, is to save those boys their stake, prove that way my right to living in this world." He broke off, hoarsely, transported by a keen memory of Snowden, quelled by a tremulous ardour. "Then — you — forever. . . ."

The silence became terrible to both, in the pressure for speech of those innumerable avowals, which the stern spirit of each reserved as vain, or sentimental; as fleeting as the moments that remained to them, thus alone.

v

The squalid cabin, their suspended danger, still dissolved around them. Attalota, mumbling, had been brewing the dry stems mixed with willow leaves that meant "tea" to him. He lifted the cracked teapot, boiling from the stove, and poured its fallow stream into three clean graniteware cups that he had set out upon the bench. Then from a baking-powder tin on the shelf overhead, he dumped four lumps of sugar; and his call of their attention to this unheard-of luxury

(Vinegar Bill's pay for hire in Lamar's grub) broke reality upon their senses. Attalota made a guttural sound in his throat, popped one of the lumps into his mouth with a roguish grimace, and, dropping the others into the cups, handed two of them to Gail and Clara with an impressive bow.

Gail mechanically took his; and as soon as its steam touched his nostrils, he gulped it down in one swallow, so that the spoon fell on the dirt. Clara, without shifting her glance from him, motioned back the old man, felt for the "makes" in her black denim skirt, rolled a wheat-paper cigarette, and, lighting it, took a deep, inhaling breath.

"Gabriel, I know what hell is," she broke out. "My life these last months. But I wouldn't have missed them for riches. And not only for meeting John and you. I was mad, a fool, to come North. But it's made a woman of me. Alaska's been the test of everything, as I hoped — of my love for Charley, my conscience toward the dry-farmers."

Gail's bosom heaved. His eyes were still on the ground, upon his cup and spoon there. He could not speak.

"I told you there at sea I thought their claim was right and just, though I hadn't the courage to break with a man like Charley, who loved me as I thought I loved him. I'd reasoned that out before I came here, saw them, heard everything. But I never knew it was John, my brother, that I'd the same as deserted, who led the dry-farmers, till one day when I was hunting across the river with Nacosta. Charley kept his name from me. But somehow John knew I was here, and was holding off for my sake. It was terrible for him. . . . We met then — after five years." She paused, quak-

ing in the white sweater she wore. "But not so much John's forgiveness, nor his being my brother, or what he told me of his partners' struggle with bribes and corruption, or the ways of our company, finally turned me against Charley. It was the man himself, how he used to talk after my eyes were opened, his scorn for this land and its pioneers, his slavery to big money and its cruelty toward the freedom and the thirsts God and the nation give men in the North — the one chance left in the world for whitemen, in this last, open realm of ours. . . . You heard him in the tent. It's sickening. Why, his pity for the boys is worse than blasphemy. And because what he says is all so true. He's a spider, in some huge suffocating web. Damn his vampire 'development'!"

Gail was clasping and unclasping his hands. "The tent swayed, Clara," he muttered. "I didn't know what I was saying or doing there." An image of the red cave-man in his chair, defying life and the future, recurred to Gail, even now all but blotting her presence for the instant.

"And it was only partly that, too, but it first showed me I couldn't have really loved him, nerved me to break with him," she went on, indomitable. "It was chiefly a feeling in this dumb waste itself — in the air, the snow, the peaks — of something rich and beautiful, perpetual and happy, that gets into your blood, that cries for music to sing of it, for deeds to possess it by, for yourself — your own livelihood."

"And children!" Gail interjected, gently.

"I was made for this land," she continued, unheard. "But it's given me a new birth, in heart and body. . . . Don't think I'm crazy. But it's not wholly my love for you and John that forced me to de-

cide, nor all my quitting Charley and our danger, that makes me talk like this. . . . Did you see the desperate faces, the jealous servility, of those poor brutes from Seattle he has working for him? Oh, they've been pathetic! And his gang made them so — crooks, I guess from their talk, and worse."

Gail strove to speak again.

"I know it's a lot to turn against a strong man that you've pledged any affection to. And Charley's so plausible, and fair to these slaves of his. He's a 'good' capitalist. But between this Alaska and a land enslaved, between one's own blood and a husband like him, I think I've judged and chosen right. . . . I say it's wickedder to kill men's dreams, to buy and bribe their souls," her voice grew stronger, defiant, as she raised her head and squared her breast, "than even to degrade your body. That's strong and pure enough, for all one's future and this country's, if it can live at all here."

Gail leaped to her with an exclamation, a wild gesture. Again he seized her in his arms. Exquisite waves thrilled his heart, but now their lips did not touch. . . . Back to them, Attalota went on wiping the tea cups without turning. And then Clara's eyes filled, inflaming yet also sanctifying the exultant pause.

"It's an old and common story — mine," she whispered at length. "I don't need to tell you. After father died in the iron-works, and mother disappeared, my head got turned, and I ran away from school there in Michigan, to find John, who had gone out to Kingdom, Idaho. Then when he went North in the '98 rush I never wrote him, nor tried to see him when he came back to Kingdom for the Chyta Company. There were three of us Hartlines, and though Martha was the least

fit to shift for herself, she'd left home first and come out to the Coast. . . . "

"M-m-artha!"

He had stiffened. The word choked him. . . . Then, breaking the hush, Clara's hesitant response:

"Yes. . . . A man led her astray."

Their first words on the *Seward* sparked out far back in Gail's memory. A fury of self-castigation seized him.

"The man you were looking for on the boat? To — kill — I hope."

"He treated her square. He really loved her."

"Her name was Hartline?"

"Of course it was. Yet she hadn't the courage, poor thing — she never had much — to use it when she wrote. And when a woman has to change her name —"

"Called herself, 'Harlow'?"

"Y-y-yes. . . . But you're hurting me, jerking so. . . . Gail! *Gabriel!!* "

Clara, understanding as well, wrenched herself madly from his arms.

VI

Still standing, she was finally the first to speak.

But Gail, hunched upon the bench, had been the first to raise a challenging head from his hands; to fling against the raw remorse, into the ache and tragedy that tore him out of the cancelled, bitter years, the potent honesty of their avowed love; thus to defy present and future; to snap the apocalyptic silence of those slow, swelling moments, through which, face to face, they grasped within a stifling haze of sorrow, hate, and love, the miracle of three lives so fatefully interwoven.

Never taking the yellow somnolent blaze of her eyes from Gail, Clara, always so candid, retorted:

"Don't confess about this, either. It's enough — to know. . . ." Her voice sank, tender. "Because *we* love now. . . ."

Ever it was she who cast the die of his existence!

"I'd had some sort of hunch, by instinct, clairvoyance maybe," she breathed. "Recollect the start you gave me right off in my stateroom? But when Martha wrote, she never mentioned your name, hardly described you."

"She told you about," Gail whispered, "how I betrayed her?"

"The lime-kilns," Clara nodded low. "But she said you did well by her, better than most men in the West would have, the best you could. And I was sure of that. Even when she wrote how 'Nick' someone bought her off, till she had to go biscuit-shooting, first in Vancouver."

Her thoughts were racing backward through the heart-galling search. Half-aghast, she saw how the strength of her present love dimmed the lost vindictiveness.

"Yes, Pelcher, damn him!"

"But you did love her. I was convinced of that. It justified. . . . Love covers everything, wipes out all else."

"But it ought to be — sacrifice." His jaw cracked. "And I've made none."

"That's only a part. Love's power is the touchstone — to kill as well as to forgo. . . . As it's killed my hate of you."

"But I told you — I can't fulfil —" Doggedly,

with his old self-abasement, he argued against his passion, so augmenting it.

"Has the time come, dear? Haven't we pledged our trust for all the future? The great test, I tell you, can't end except in death."

On a sudden pause, their voices echoed around them, strangely hollow. They felt as if their entwined gaze were drowning them.

"I—I can't reach you," stammered Gail. "I see everything in life so differently. . . . And first—" On his lips was "parenthood." Shyly, he could not begin that prime and greater revelation in her presence now.

"Hark!" she started. "Was that a shot?"

Each had caught a faint, far report. Their look flinched, veered apart, not to unite again as it had been.

"No," Clara answered her own question. "Not loud enough for any of Charley's guns. Nacosta's kids have a .22."

They let out their breaths. But shot or no, it was as if some alien arrow had shattered the crystal castle of their dreams.

"Whatever we think or feel," Gail's voice awoke, deep but very tender, "the next hours fix us, for all time, girl. If one or both don't get out alive, nothing matters. But if we do, together or separated—"

"The sacrifice comes there," she interrupted.

"We couldn't live together—yet?"

Clara shook her head. "I'd like to say, 'Not till you've gone the limit to get free.'" Gail read in her quick glance the curiosity that she restrained so easily. "But that wouldn't be true with a woman like me, and a love like ours. So let's be honest with

ourselves." He caught the twinkle in her eyes. "Let's call the reason sheer poverty." Her tongue was in one cheek. "Well, if we do win Torlina, it may be years before there's any stake. Even we can't live on snow-balls up here."

"A year, then?" he urged, hotly.

"Or less. There's a new gold strike," she added, alert, "on Yanaga River, in western Alaska, very far from here, northwest of the Kuskokwim. One outfit starved getting out this spring. The news just came from Valdez — four-foot paystreaks, bedrock only eight down, and as rich on the benches." Her face gleamed with the vision, that resistless infection of the land.

"Placer gold, then. That's our stake. Copper's no poor man's proposition, with the capital it takes in this country."

"Hit for the Yanaga, Gail. Write me to Kingdom. And if John fails, or the law makes monkeys of us any more, I'll join you there. We'd revel in it."

"Yes — gold," pondered Gail. "It's bread. At the heart of everything, even of our love. The source of all things, even of the dreams and images that live on after us." (Where before had he heard those words?) "I've learned that from the North; that, and how to fight for and win them." Again his thoughts rushed back to Snowden. "That mountain-climber, you remember? He taught me chiefly."

"Robert Snowden? He got to the top?"

"No. I did. Alone."

She winced, yet only to raise her features to his, open-mouthed with admiration, irradiated by a sad, discerning light.

"Oh — poor boy!" All her strong heart was in

the cry. "And I thought he was crazy, with all he tried to tell about his itch for cliffs and glaciers."

"It was the thought of you, your inspiration, the touch of your unseen hands, Clara," Gail cried, "that carried me through the splendour and the danger of that climb. You led me to victory on Lincoln, as you shall in the life before us."

"Sh — listen!" she broke in again; but Gail went on unheeding, transported,

"Bob Snowden was trying to win life and the future, as we are, like John and the boys. And their fight would be his fight here, for the ends that your Charley blocks. I'm with you now because of Bob. It was he showed me the undying life in everyone, and always the war to gain it. We're here on earth to fight for more than our poor, passing lives. Every man has an eternity he must seize for himself. Mine —" he broke off. "I'll tell you the rest —"

"I understand, Gail, every word."

They had sprung to their feet, braced and rigid.

There arose once more to Gail's lips the lessons of his piteous triumph on Mt. Lincoln; the story of his blighted life with Lena, of that yearning for a son which marked him from his fellows; how Clara should fulfil it; its despair in the lodging-house, his vow to study the voids and aches in human souls as uplifting Nature bared them — all, summed in the creed of Charity or Death.

But he voiced no word of this. In the tense, galloping seconds of their harking, it flashed through Gail: "Must I be dumb — and wisely, justly — forever?" He had not attained his goal. Not yet had the bridge of fruition been cast out across the void of his own soul. The keystone still was lacking.

A volley of shots had blared out through the quiet sunlight of noon, in the direction of the Atna.

VII

Back in Gail's head sounded the same soothing click as when he had saved Bob under the big cornice on Mt. Lincoln. He heard a familiar humming, like a wheel revolving into invisibility, which slightly, welcomely, dulled his senses. A scarlet spot stained Clara's pale cheeks. Then the perilous world closed in upon their transitory idyll.

"John's across!" shouted Gail.

"To the boys!" Clara panted, cougar-like.

She flung open the cabin door, upon the frowsy lean-tos and ruinous shacks. Beyond, the wailing of dogs and shouts of savages mingled with the smoke and crackle of a battle in full blast.

Gail felt an acid tightening across his ribs, stupefying for an instant. It seemed that they stood for an age in that doorway, calm and numb in the inert and blinding sunlight. But action, as with a fierce galvanism, shocked their taut nerves and sinews. With an oath, Clara darted back into the cabin, returning with one of Attalota's curved knives. They left him gaping, ashen, a limp wet rag in his hand.

They circled the uproar, toward the Atna. Gail heard Clara running in his wake. He was wondering how the dry-farmers, armed so helplessly, could have crossed the river and be firing so much. Surely John had attacked the guard along shore, and was forcing them back. Unaware of having drawn it, Gail had Blackwood's gun cocked in his hands. Bullets whipped overhead with a waspish sighing, yet louder than the volleys.

The shore willows darkened through the whitish smoke, and Gail's heart bounded, as he saw the crooked line of men advancing from the brush; their beloved, distorted faces: the bearded Hartline, hulking Ireson furiously chewing tobacco, young Luke, old Mease wearing his canvas gloves — all blurs, except for some detail like the leer of Tony's harelip, or Tom's cruel eyes, as he inevitably did lead them in his yellow boots and red bandanna. And each held a shooting iron! They greeted Gail with a steadying shout of relief and incitation.

Next, Tom was at his side. Each was blazing away. Tom's voice rose weak and strident, as if out of a dream. He told how John had begun to build rafts after giving up the hunt for Blackwood — this on a "hunch" of Luke's — had worked them like convicts all night. They had crossed and landed undiscovered, until Lamar's look-out on shore had mistaken John for him, Gail. Ten of them, ambushed separately and unaware of the dry-farmers' numbers, John had overpowered and disarmed.

Slowly they advanced into the roaring haze, clearing the settlement to the left, toward Attalota's cabin. Figures were running to cover behind it, firing as they scurried. John was at Gail's right, and beyond, Clara. Gail thrust the Judge's letter into his leader's hand, shouting faintly, "Read her! It's the skunk's own noose. Torlina's ours!" And John grabbed the paper with a nod of mingled venom and rejoicing that ever after supplanted Gail's memory of his dogged reserve. A pasty-faced man with side-whiskers, who had tried to flank them, fell close by at a shot from McConighy. Farther, Lindsey, without his eyeglasses.

The dry-farmers were driving them! The choking

dust and powder were delicious to Gail's nostrils, ecstatic in his eyes were the distorted sweating faces, to his ears the savage yelling of the Indians, discharging their pistols into the air at the edge of the conflict, to goad it on. . . . Luke whipped past him. There was a rush of shapes out from behind the old man's cabin, where Lamar's packers had gathered, reinforcing the defeated. The shots redoubled. A thump reverberated in front of Gail. Luke had fallen, a hand pressed to his throat. He raised his humid, docile eyes to Gail, with a moan that stabbed.

A scarlet curtain fell across Gail's pupils. A myriad glistening stars pricked them. A fiendish, destroying lust flared through him. He gloried in his rage. He had saved Tom through charity: that had been its meed. He thirsted now for the delirious joy of killing. . . .

Out of a rift in the smoke, he spotted a red-faced, burly figure clad in blue — Lamar. Clara was facing him, raised knife to drawn revolver. Her black skirt hung tattered by bullets. But she did not strike; instead, sighting Gail, she yielded her place to him, and darted aside, into the cabin of their avowals, with a half-inarticulate cry of triumph. Lamar had turned tail, escaping. With a yell, Gail plunged after him, as he fired over a shoulder. . . . The creature ran, like a huge, shivering rat . . . ran and ran. . . .

Then Gail was far from the uproar, drawing ever closer to his quarry. From a poplar grove, they splashed through the dead, luxuriant grass of a slue, nearing the paneled benches at the far end of the flat. And Gail's ravening heart was now strangely quiet.

At the edge of a spruce clump, Lamar faced about, like a bear at bay. Shots broke out behind. One

sucked and sang through Gail's hair. He saw two men floundering across the patch of swamp, in pursuit. Lamar made as if to throw up his arms, but did not. He had lost or dropped his gun. His coarse lips opened. He bellowed defiant blasphemies. Gail heard dimly, watching him stoop into the grass, lift and level his automatic. . . . Gail fired first. . . . The creature toppled backward.

A dark trickle of blood was oozing from the middle of his forehead. He lay on his back, his livid features, once so shrewd, now imbecile — flabby . . . toad-like.

Gail plunged on toward the paneled benches, intoxicated. He marked the pair that followed gather about the corpse. They lifted its legs, fat under their puttees.

High in the dazzling, blue-white ether, an eagle was swinging above the roseate peaks and shining glaciers. A sea-gull breasted against a scarf of cloud that enveloped the coronet of Spirit Mountain down the Atna. Nearby, the aspen leaves were veined with red and yellow, like the flesh in old men's cheeks. Gail was at the foot of a clay escarpment. Climbing, his fingers dug into the dry silt. . . .

Far up at last, darkness swept through his swooning, satiated being, and he sank upon the soft forest floor.

BOOK FOUR

. . .

CHAPTER XIV

DICK TRUEBLOOD

I

For two days, since Gail had raised his head into the twilight of an immense spruce forest, he had wandered dazed with hunger, exhausted, among densely wooded scarps, searching for the Valdez trail, to follow Clara and his partners. Yet his mind and body had awakened keen; he had the sense of having grasped an immortal gain, of having trodden spheres beneath him, in which he had reached victory on Mt. Lincoln. He felt even that light impulsive freedom, the detachment from all his past, which had marked another day as harrowing as these two were triumphant.

Clara could not be else than safe with the winning dry-farmers, who would not fail, with Lamar's horses and ahead of his leaderless gang, to reach the Valdez land-office, and restake Torlina. The enemy had surely stayed at the townsite. For that reason Gail had not tried to reach it alone, and now was lost.

On the second evening, he estimated that he was up-river, far north of the place. In its direction, a wide gorge cut him off, and seemed to wall existence from all the world of his last three months. A few gaunt rose-bushes with shriveled hips sprang from a velvety car-

pet of green and clammy joint-weed. Dead, tinder-dry under-limbs of the gigantic spruces curved over one another in close thatches. A slant golden light in their tops told him that it was again afternoon. Somewhere he heard a late robin caroling.

He had killed a man, in this duty decreed by his faith in life, and in the Youngest World and its saviours; and for the cause in which Bob had said that he would feel no guilt. Gail did not. He asked himself: "Is this owing to the pervading force of Bob's ideas, or to my own hard nature?" He had a vague sense of superiority to abstract sayings. He had proved Snowden's in action, and Snowden had failed. Equally Lamar's batrachian leer in death, and Luke's boyish anguish, faded from his brain. But had the dream been quite enacted, the door of all effort and self-denial closed? Never — for him and his thirsts in the North!

There was his compact about this new gold stampepe with Clara. It was her command for them to meet in the Yanaga fields. There was their utter poverty, and Lena: might she not divorce him for desertion? Suppose he should not see Clara for the year that they had allotted? It shamed him to think that, treasuring her memory but as the lodestar that it had so long been, he might endure such time; that the sacrifice in this separation could be chiefly hers.

Was the power of love in him, as she had defined it, less omnipotent than in her? Not the all-effacing reagent that she conceived? Only passion? Was he too sure of her? At the very outset in Attalota's cabin, his body had enfolded hers; but after they had bared their hearts, and death was breaking around them, he had flamed only with his instinctive ideas and ideal purposes. Always he placed them first, higher, above

everything. And yet her compelling image had inspired his privations and achievements, warmed his heart to the aspirations of men, given his eyes a new, palpitant discernment. Could his love be a force yet deeper, more self-concealing, less articulate — a thing bound up with the silent processes of Nature, in the slow mill of the revolving spheres?

Impetuously, wearily, he faced North. The heart of Alaska still lay poleward. In a flood of renunciation, he groaned under his breath. He knew only that the trail leading to the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers joined and followed the Atna somewhere northward up the valley.

Immediately he came upon a moose-track. It led to the edge of a terrace that dropped into the river-gorge, through dusty sage-brush. In the open now, he could see the fresh coastal snows far southward, exhaling a bluish glow, as if they were mountains of stained glass. Against their brighter bases, spruces a league away stood forth gall-green, reticulated, like brush around a fire at night. Gail plugged on, quickly tuckered, but with the zest of a pilgrim proud of his endurance, through the tangible, quiet sadness of the deadening autumn. In the east, the smooth, smokeless Unalita snow-fields floated pinkish before the setting sun, out of serene pools of azure light. Entering streams cut the far river-scarps into arched, even panels, faintly carmine with late fireweed, and haunted suddenly by the sub-bass of the river. Gail descended toward its grey-green flood, among burned spruces like great charcoal pencils, which lay as jack-straws upon the crimson blueberry leaves. At the foot of a pale cliff that shouldered into the swirling water, he sighted a Siwash shack, amid its offal and belligerent dogs.

In the darkness, fish was bubbling in an old kerosene can, upon live coals by the door. Aching with hunger, Gail pushed inside. A ball of cotton, floating in a saucer of salmon oil, lit up the foul interior, where a not unclean squaw crouched on the earth. She was frying over a fire, sobbing into her pan.

II

It was the cabin of the Indian Nacosta. The woman was Nannasnitnaw, his wife. Soon the buck came in with his gun, a tall young Siwash in a worn fur cap, with thin, handsome upper features, but a brutal jimber-jaw. He welcomed Gail sullenly, incurious, after the way of his race, of the firing down river, or a white-man's larger purposes in his land. They drank tea, ate clammy flap-jacks, in an oppressed silence, broken by Nannasnitnaw's pain. Once Nacosta truculently tossed a piece of salmon toward what Gail had thought was a bundle of rags under the bench. "Hi, Tsakootna!" he said, and the dark, withered little hand of a baby girl poked out of the rubbish. She wolfed the morsel, her face mercifully hidden under long and matted hair. Later she licked all their plates. Nacosta unrolled a caribou skin for Gail, tossed him a grimy blanket, and as he curled up in them under the gilt ikon by the door, spat on the light, and turned in beside his squaw, who had ceased whimpering.

Gail fell asleep at once; but only to be aroused, after great lapses of time, by a rough hand pressed on his forehead, and the Indian's voice in his ear.

Gail listened to his complaint about Nannasnitnaw. A widower, Nacosta had married her five months ago. Last snow (winter) she had lived at Taral village, with one "King" Oscar, a big Norwegian. A week back

she had had a *skinkai* (baby), born with white hair. Nacosta had taken it by the feet, banged its head on a rock and dropped it into the river. . . . The murderer made a convulsive movement under his blankets, a sucking between his teeth, and rolled away as if in self-justification.

A dizzy spot spread under Gail's ribs. He felt wilted, helpless, as if he had been struck. He slept no more. He could have no remorse for killing Lamar, but the murder of this bastard stirred him to an angry sorrow, made the palms of his hands wet with perspiration. Was Nacosta's hate of miscegenation racial and instinctive, or only copied from whitemen — Indian imitativeness? So calm a cancelling of life in the wilderness that craved it! Was such perversity, as much as their shiftless improvidence, a key to the savages' diminution? Between them and Alaska, and Lena, Madge, and the last West, Gail seemed to perceive a sardonic bond, rooted in some like contempt for life.

A pasty glow lit the broken window. Gail heard the steady hum of rain on the mud roof; a trickle drummed on the bench, splashed into his face. He wanted to quit the place as if it were a plague spot. He threw off the blanket, and slipped outside into the sickly dawn, where the dogs lay with noses curled under their tails among the ashes of the fire.

He took two salmon from the drying frame, and started North up the river, by the track cut into the clay wall. He traveled all day, through the cold gloom, from gravel bar to bar, wading slues, over the slimy leaf-wrack, in feathery bunch-grass and frost-nipped willows. At the early dark, as he was gnawing his last sliver of fish, he sighted telegraph poles, and met the trans-Alaskan trail. The rain stopped in a

glinting sky. He crossed a roaring tributary by a wire suspension bridge, passed the neat whitewashed logs of the Army Signal Corps relay station. Beyond, a larger shack was surrounded by fields of stubble and ploughed-up turnips. In a garden of dead poppies behind a paling fence, a grey, tired-looking man, with an egg-shaped head, gaunt shoulders and rheumy eyes, dressed in a garment like a linen duster, was hanging khaki shirts on a clothes-line.

"North," answered Gail, laconically, to the man's hail and question whither he was bound, to his offer of supper and a bunk. It was the Government Experimental Farm. But Clifford, in charge, spoke of himself as a "faunal naturalist"; and all the time that he fried ham on the cottage stove indoors, where the walls were hung with prints of animals from Smithsonian reports, with sample wheat-heads and Siberian rye — as they ate jam from big blue cans (government luxury freighted in in winter, along with the horse-hair sofa) — he talked about raising foxes in captivity.

In his jerky, whining voice, as they washed up, and all through the evening, he spoke of nothing else. Foxes obsessed him. He referred to his job of planting the grains that matured earliest in order to breed hardier strains — to his raising rutabagas for the Siwashes (which they refused to eat) — as to a fatuous ordeal. But he had never succeeded with his pets; his foxes always died; all scientists had given up rearing them, called it impossible. Gail, dozing on the sofa over a dog-eared magazine, could not make out exactly why. Indeed, to conceal the reason for his failure, seemed to be part of the man's fanaticism. But he was confident; some day the pups would live.

And an errant, shifting light filled the sallow brown eyes under his creased forehead, as he talked on, of how finally he would shake the faunal world to its depths, receive decorations, revolutionise the fur-trade — until the lamp died, and they groped to bed.

An icy wind pierced the chinks of the loft where Gail lay under an army blanket on a wire cot. The smell and crackle of bacon drew him down the ladder. Clifford was holding a lantern over the stove.

“Hiking North, eh?” he said at breakfast, as if by recalling his greeting of the night before he wished to bridge over and ignore his obsession. “But you’ve got no grub.” The faunal naturalist finished his cup of coffee. “Look here,” he said. “I get a double allowance — for the wife that I don’t want. I can’t sell it. It’s Government rations. You want them?” And before Gail could thank him, he went on, “And the sorrel mare that I haven’t the hay to winter? Take her, too. I’ll help ye pack. Most of the feed on the trail’s frozen, but she ought to last you to the Siwashes at Mentasta. Kill her then.”

At daylight, among the rusted harrows and harvesters behind the house, they caught the shaggy little beast, fitted on her blankets and saw-buck; sacked flour and rice, fruit, bacon, took pots from the house; threw the cinch in silence. And all that time, Clifford was casting shy, intent glances to a low board shack, faced with wire netting, in a corner of the yard. At last, as Gail stood halter in hand at the narrow garden gate, the man paused in his information about fords and cut-offs on the trail, and said in a strained whisper:

“You want to see them? My foxes?”

Gail followed him back to the little house. In the acrid odour of the shy, wild creatures, he peered through

the metal mesh upon hard soil covered with the tiny bones of ducks and ravens. A box with one side stove out had been sunk there, leading down to tunnels.

But no foxes appeared. Clifford kicked at the screen. Still none. He drew a deep breath, and plucking Gail by an elbow, led him back to the mare. Head down there, he said with a hushed awe:

"I'll tell you the secret. In captivity, the mothers eat their young. Under conditions that are artificial, the law of perpetuity provides that animal life tends to extinction. . . . Applies to all mammals who need not fight for their food — humans as well."

Far out on the trail, the words still rang through Gail's ears. At the first of them, he had yanked the mare's halter, squeezed through the gate, in a despairing ferment.

Foxes, Siwashes, whitemen! Was life a curse in this land? And yet — and yet — a man still might battle for it!

III

The pallid sky became a bowl of lacquered brass, and black against it, the curl of steam from Unalita. Over its dome, a saucer-shaped cloud drooped fine tendrils, like one titanic sunfish in a limpid sea. Cloudlessly the sunlight died from the crisp, glittering morasses. The air grew dense and woolly; the silence hummed. Toward noon, an elusive whisper drowned the moan of the Atna. The first snow began to sift through the dead willows where the mare stumbled on, slumping through the frozen muck, cutting her ankles. . . .

Gail camped in an abandoned shack by the river, surrounded by empty salmon caches, like huge bird-houses on bandy legs, by bath huts of willow withes bent

over piles of stones. Alkali in the slue-water curdled his tea. He slept in the mare's blankets.

IV

This was the first of many days, of many miles. For months Gail scoured the North. Hunger, cold, and loneliness became to him entities; they grew homely as the meaty plenty of his camps in the Ketchumstocks' country, where their fences caught the grey herds of migrating caribou, until tent-poles groaned with the fresh, fetid wild meat, and their gorged dogs slept on scarlet snow; as familiar as the buzz of talk in humid road-houses along the Yukon, where the fate of nations, the source of placer gold, and the keeping quality of this year's butter as against last's, was settled around the great drum stoves, with the rime inches thick on the windows, and the hewn walls papered from tomato cans; 60° below zero grew as intimate as his many partners of a week, of a month, an hour.

The day after he left Clifford, Gail fell in with two young bucks, Stickwan and Nicolai. Teasing him for chews of tobacco, pilfering his grub when his back was turned in camp, eating *tschosh* root and fish oil, singing "*Hetnehay, Hetnehi!*"—they led him to the big village of Mentasta. From November there, where the *shaman's* tom-tom incantation against the spirit of disease (it looked like measles) thr'bed all night across the frozen lake, to the day in March that Dick Trueblood, freighting a rich, rheumatic "operator" on his dog-sled to be baked out in the hospital at Chickamen, pulled him out of a river—built a fire and saved his life—Gail steeped himself in the soul of his Youngest World.

He crossed the great Alaskan Range as anchor ice

gripped the creeks. In the smoky leantos of Tetling, he heard the squaws halloo as they caught white-fish in willow nets, and helped gut them, squatting amid dogs and infants, while the snow blizzed across the stiff ooze and pickerel grass. He lived as a Siwash, wise in the paradox of their existence; friend of the insolent, lounging bucks, to whom sex and motherhood were a joke — before Gail, anyhow — yet who would rather starve than camp where one of the clan had died. They fingered over his clothes and kit, questioned him curiously about them, but seemed not to care if their own store of fish would not last out the winter. Parasitic, condescending, they hunted with a boyish craft, trapped sable indolently, as their women shivered under tattered canvas, brewing tea, eternally mending moccasins, bullying the cowed and starving dogs, feeding naked babes from the points of knives. After the inch-grass froze, and she kicked him when he drove her, Gail traded the sorrel mare for moose pemmican, with a chief's one-eyed son, Singolai by name, who the same morning blackened his squaw's eyes, because she stole and chewed the inexhaustible quid that he kept in a tin pill-box. Thence he traveled, alone and packing on his back, the strange flat-topped ranges of the Forty-mile. Stone columns like ruined temples crowned each, among buck-brush spiked with frost as long as coral. The southern alps sank into white tents on the horizon. Ptarmigan crouched like marble carvings in the trail. He crossed vast, dry lake bottoms, plains of standing, tropic dried grass, that danced with the ruddy orange of winter mirages; and on a summit above the Yukon Ramparts, he lived a week with Government "jerries" — trail-

workers rigging a steel wireless tower, who gossiped of commissary graft and distilling "houch." There was a squaw dance at the river. In a great cabin, till dawn, a hundred moccasins thumped the dust in wild reels, to accordions and mouth-organs; the bunks and babies heaped in corners; and Mica-schist Billy, gambler, in a frock coat and poker-chips for cuff-buttons, hit the seventh log at each fling with his Malemute Annie. Outside, in the blear, cruel light, Gail saw the mile-wide tide of ice set solid. The moving avenue of separate, jammed cakes gave forth an incisive, silken rustling. Of a sudden, with a crunching as if his own jaws had cracked, the whole Yukon petrified into a glistening corrugation.

Life then lay with whitemen clad in *parkas* of striped bed-ticking and cross-fox hoods, in seal *mukluks*; with their jingling dog-teams; in the Pullman bunks of road-houses, where men entered in clouds of steam to press ice-matted beards against the stove, and banter with kindly, coarse-voiced hostesses who talked unctuously at their seething griddles of Dawson dance-halls and trial husbands. There came weeks of weary trail-breaking on snow-shoes, through the infinite, inchoate quiet of snow and twilight; of "hawing" at the gee-pole to the curled tails of fluffy, willing dogs, as the sled smoothly skimmed the darkening peril of "flooding" rivers, or pounded over rim-ice to a ceaseless "Mush! Mush!" As the beasts strained out of chuck-holes, flopped down to chew the snowballs from their feet, and at night tore one another's throats over their salmon and boiled rice.

For mates Gail had the slim, blue-eyed Atwater, private, who had deserted from Fort Gibbon for a tale

of placer platinum. Sheep-faced old Martin, with his club-foot, who had driven a cracker wagon in St. Louis, and whose daughter Blanche was "the elocutionist, you know." John Cantine that sapient cynic who discoursed unanswerably of the peoples' rights, yet believed that all golden gravels had dropped from the underside of ice-bergs drifting from Siberia when the North was undersea. Hairy Jocelyn the mail-carrier, whose ambition was to own a span of Morgan horses, but had failed so far because, "it's far away diggin's that is always rich." The wrinkled Scotchman, late of the N. W. M. P., who when lost on Slana River had killed his dog-team in berserker anger. Ayres, the stout squawman with the State-o'-Maine twang, bather of the whole village of Androfski in a small-pox epidemic. Dr. Ford, veterinary, from Grand Rapids, in search of a cinnabar mountain. And Hogan, the spiritualist, who prospected by clairvoyance, less to find gold than to prove his faith; and last year had vindicated it in the rush camp of Sourdough, by baking a hundred pies from canned pumpkins the night before as many stampedeers staggered in. . . .

Gail spent Christmas with Père Morice of the Kwinhagamut Mission. Though he had the nose of a Savonarola, he was mostly heart, and in the famine of '94 had traded the silver mission cups to save the starving Tananas. They saw the New Year in at a feast of cranberries and moosefat. As the father sat under his lithographed lives of Christ and Judas, side by side on the wall, devising a phonetic syllabus for the language of his flock, Gail watched the red spirit in the thermometer outside, that advertised a pain-killer, sink to — 76°.

Ever toward the Yanaga! . . .

Penniless, he earned his grub on road-house wood-piles, chopping; and under tents in the vacant regions, as cook, he melted icicles from the stove at dawn, fed and hitched the dogs. He learned that in the obliterating North no man need starve, or stray with death, unless he is a blackguard or a fool. It was a kindly land.

He saw his trail-mates as a people apart, a picked and destined band. None so far had struck it rich; yet they served no master but their daily dream of gold. It made their lives fierce and hopeful. It claimed the realm for men alone of their own mettle, for sluice-box, quartz mill, hydraulic pipe; for "the" railroad ultimately. Gold was the god of this relentless land they loved, and of their yet more inexorable selves; the goal of that prime challenge of naked Nature — to her own subdual; of that chastening struggle with cold and hunger by which she makes living justify itself; for which she is so craved, so hated, and endured.

From homes that overspread the nation, they summed its bravery and aspiration, its ignorance and faith. They spoke with simple frankness of the wife who had erred, of a brother's immolation for his kin, or the partner that turned thief. Their judgments, squeezed out by having suffered in the muck of life, knifed theory and sentimentalism with sharp truth. And they were young and free eternally. The grey-haired and the beardless breasted each adventure with the same light valour; proved it vain — no matter. They had annihilated age. . . . Sympathy! Gail was beyond feeling that for them. He was — *they*.

And they were the men of Occidental Avenue who had

had the courage alike of their sinews and their visions; who stirred Lamar's damning pity, and the jealous envy of all wastrels; the goad of whose faith, nourished by the land and inculcated by Bob, had regenerated Gail, as an assassin and without remorse.

They, too, had given right and wrong new boundaries; and laughed in reminiscences of "neck-tie parties" (hangings) in stampede camps. They stained sin and crime in new shades, and had granted divorces with that gusto integral with virility.

Thus it was in no fear of the law for having killed Lamar that Gail shunned the big camps. The rumour that gradually accused him found men apathetic and incurious. They would have laughed at world-wide wealth holding the North to be its toy. And on the snowy trails Gail avoided the parasites of the gold dream — the pimp with his slaves, and pirates of the faro case. There, also, he could foster at least respect (argonauts yield scant homage except for their own heroisms) toward Bob as the real master of Mt. Lincoln.

Slowly Gail succeeded in this. He found himself a leader, dominating men without effort. He became a familiar figure at the gee-pole; stirring sour dough by the smoke of campfires; in the broad blue stripes of his *parka*, the light marmot-skin cap over his high, copper features, the slant eyebrows, concaved cheeks, the crinkling upper lip which had forgotten discontent.

Ah, but the heart of pioneering was invulnerable!

VI

Gold was the keystone of all men's toil and self-denials, the source of their unconfessed love of isolation and the North. Instead of blighting honour, leveling passion, it ennobled men; and more than the fortuity of discovery,

or its clean directness of production, gave gold this exalted spell. Man was but a phantom raised in its mirages. He served no destiny but gold, conceived no ends beyond his "stake." Gold was in itself an immortal thirst.

Gail caught the fever, came to look at life in terms of it. Gold was, indeed, the germ of all the material, constructive spirit of the frontier, to which long ago he had been so blind; it was the god of that patient, aspiring life of the Youngest World, the core within its prodigal sordidness and greedy shams. Gold was bread, and bread was perpetuity. He was in its thralldom, which, like the web of life itself, is a fabric of luck and labour, the secret of whose victories lies in the strength of human bodies clinging to their dreams.

Thus, when the sun crossed the meridian, and the snows at evening exhaled in a pallid fluorescence the rays that they had absorbed by day, Gail was mushing alone toward the stampede camp of Chickaman, on the divide between the Tanana and Kuskokwim Rivers. Chickaman, itself the main settlement of a rich placer district, was the one town that bordered the Yanaga region on the north. It was the outfitting and departure point for the new eldorado from interior Alaska, as Beluga, on the Pacific Coast in Cook Inlet, was the starting point of the long trail thither from the south.

At times in these days, believing that he perceived all guises of unending life, read the riddle of Nature — articulate in the sunset rosiness of snow and cliff, in the blinding drive of blizzards — Gail would bend forward, mutter some wild apostrophe to the naked earth, from its chaotic dawning, through its cruel Russian days, to this Now of a Youngest World; of which at last he felt himself an apostle.

VII

He fell in with Trueblood on the winter trail to Chickaman, in March. Son of the A. C. Co. clerk at Fort Nenana, young Dick was driving big Steve Gash on a high-sided sled, for \$10 a day, to the hospital in the camp. But even in the tent at night, Gail seldom saw the flabby, wasted face of the "operator," muffled in plucked beaver, dumb with rheumatism.

Trueblood had been born in Alaska, and was known the land over as a rustler. He had had no schooling, except from the leather-bound books of the Fort library — such science and philosophy, Gail gathered in his talk, as folk on the "outside" send to allay men's loneliness in the North at the risk of making them insane. And Gail failed to dominate him; instead, he was driven into his shell on the day of their first intimacy, when Dick, in his cock-sure, imperative way called him a "hold-up ideelist." So that when they swapped histories, Gail hid from him his life with Martha and Lena, the secrets of his love for Clara, the adventure with Bob. But the flash of Dick's brown-amber eyes, like poniards, under the white muffler that alone covered his head, seemed to read Gail with a cowering penetration which kept them strangers up to the day of their separation on the upper Kantinaw River.

Early that morning, they had left a general camping-place near the pot-hole of the Itazak Glacier from Mt. McKinley. Many runner-tracks radiated across the river in all directions, and before these converged into the trail, Gail, following a wolverine's spoor toward the rim-ice, suddenly slumped through the skim over a breathing hole. Dick fished him out with a dog-harness. When he had thawed Gail at a fire in the timber on an

island, Dick ended the awful silence of the ten minutes which in that unearthly cold meant life or death, by saying:

"I'll take no thanks from a harsh one like you."

Gail motioned a dazed repudiation.

"Well, a living fight between a brute and a softie, then," he conceded, only to blurt, "A woman made you so. Or you may need one."

With a covert thrill, Gail ignored the conjecture, to say, "You must be hard to win out in this country. You got to see and feel for men, but when you have to, take the short cut with a gun, like I did to Lamar."

"One or the other nature in you," averred Dick, with a patronising quietness, halving the paper for a cigarette, "will cook your goose some day up here in Alaska."

"But yourself," retorted Gail, "and a woman? . . . Not yet?"

Dick's head drooped. As Gail held his steaming *parka* over the flames, he watched the muscles of the boy's face creep, in a way they had, under his milk-and-rosy cheeks, saw his peculiarly white teeth set between his thick tremulous lips.

"Never," Dick roughly extended an arm. "I don't know women, except squaws. And they can't be stood without you played on them with a hose. And one would freeze stiff up here," he laughed boyishly. . . . "Recollect Samson in the Bible? Every woman carries a pair of shears for me. And you got to be able to pack the gates of Gaza to last out in this North—that I'd die for, to have partners like you and me rule."

"We just see that, after these weeks," stammered Gail, seizing him by the hand.

Dick looked away, to mumble,

“‘Out of the eater came forth food,
Sweetness out of the strong—’

something like that, you remind me. It always sounded more like Ella Wheeler Wilcox, than in the Bible I mention. There must be something wrong in any man could write po'try. . . . Well, I'm pulling out.”

Dick had planned to reach Chickaman, still sixty miles off, that night. Gail, traveling a-foot, knew that he could not make it until the next. Dick shouted to his dogs, and they strained away. Indefinably bewildered and uplifted, Gail stepped into his snow-shoes, slung on his pack and veered out upon the river, following Dick's runner-tracks, as he then thought.

They led from the river, up a narrow valley edged by sharp, sudden mountains, and filled with ponds and red-stemmed willows. The rocks were covered with a moss like mildewed buckskin. Toward noon, Gail noticed that the paw-prints in the snow flanked the runner-marks, so that the dogs could not be in harness. The impressions were large and wolfish, unlike those of Dick's collies. Gail realised that he was off the main trail.

Presently the strange outfit came into sight, a tattered, pitiable company. A limping klootchman (squaw) in a grey muffler led it, packing a stove, her red drawers bagging on the snow; then a bent, bow-legged buck as old as time, in hairless sheep-skins; two kids in raveled canvas, and last, an aged squaw, stumbling along as she toted a hand-sled burdened by a long wooden box stenciled over with a Seattle grocer's lettering. A baby in a tight bundle of moss swung from her back, its face bobbing against the edge of an

axe. In leaping a ridge of snow, one of the flat-bellied dogs, heavily loaded with pots and sacks of salmon, fell over on his back, and lay wriggling his legs in the air.

"Klatowa?" (Going?) asked Gail, righting the dog.

"Hoherda," the old klotch answered, pointing forward. She turned her face to Gail's. It was as lined and shrunken as a cured moose-hide; and blue, painted lines ran outward from her toothless mouth.

"No Chickaman tlail?" he asked with a sinking sense.

She nodded. "Summer tlail." The others turned, stared at him dully for a moment, and kept on without pausing. They did not swarm around him, Siwash-wise. Gail crunched forward, feeling a dejected sympathy.

So, he was on the land trail to Chickaman, used when the river was open. But Hoherda! . . . It was one of those "dead cities" of Alaska, the parables of camp gossip the North over; each a focus of that stamped-in anarchy of '98, when the loudest talker who could pan two colours in a creek lured across the blue autumn distances the bearded, filthy, disillusioned riff-raff of far cities, with soft hands numbed by their first toil, cursing the splendour of their dreams, to build habitations and spawn disease. Hectic, mottled with scurvy, they blunted their last days before starvation in log dive and dance-hall, in those passions of "civilisation" that had blighted them from birth. By spring, life in the North henceforth was chastened and heroic to a few survivors; but the mass (outside the graveyard) returned south, boasting of hardships, reviling the land, hardened for keener parasitisms. In the summer si-

lence, toadstools crowned the dung-heaps where horses had been nourished on baked beans; porcupine quills rattled against phonographs and sewing-machines within the gaping door-ways; rank plants smothered the mud roofs, and the flooding slue circled all with green slime and mosquitoes. The memory of Hoherda and its sisters lived in the wilderness, like a miasma.

"Let me see this," thought Gail to himself, ploughing on behind the savages. "Thus the land exacts its toll, to test the worthy." His divergence on the summer trail seemed providential.

Under blue clouds furred with gold, a raven swept so low that he heard the satiny, shroud-like rustle of its wings. Then the dark spruces opened upon the thin snow of a clearing, lemon-hued in the latening evening. The cabins appeared, tossed about like misshapen blocks, their black window and door spaces dumbly eloquent of the suffering and wantonness that they had seen. Gail trod gingerly through the brittle, waist-high weeds; a nail pierced one moccasin; he entered one of the shacks.

Sodden grey shirts and decaying jumpers lay all about in the smell of rotting canvas, simulating corpses. In the havoc wrought by wolf and wolverine, among ashes scattered from the mud chimney, were picks, shovels, gold-pans, a whip-saw, and three big blue-glazed match cartons. There were broken mirrors, rusty stove-pipe, and sage-green pills trickling from a bottle in an upset medicine chest. A gilt shaving mug dangled on a wire from the rafters. Among the tattered prints and newspapers nailed to the logs, he marked the face of a dark, passionate woman, which was also clever. "The Italian Camille," was printed underneath, "D-u-s-e." He picked up a sheet of music,

"The Maiden's Prayer — F. Schubert;" and at his feet was a broken violin.

Lying upon this, he saw a newspaper. Every other scrap of paper in the cabin was yellow with age. It was the *Valdez Prospector*. He opened it, reading a November date of the year past. Some one on the way in to Chickaman had camped there, as a pile of unsodden ashes in one corner showed, before the Kantinaw had set. Gail recalled that stirring evening when he had watched the dry-farmers opening their mail from home, and his flashing thought then, that some day he would receive a revealing intimation. . . . He scanned the brief dispatches in the sheet from the forgotten, teeming southland, the local gossip of assessment-work, hydraulic propositions, new creeks and lodes, caches, options, quartz-mills. His eyes fixed, staring, under a notice of the Thanksgiving raffle for a diamond ring in "Nell's place." The blood veined into all his extremities, as he read:

"Pending a decision in Charles Lamar's appeal against the ownership of the Torlina townsite by John Hartline, his sister Clara will take an outfit into the Yanaga country by way of Beluga, Cook Inlet."

Gail's heart leaped. He would find her there. She was keeping their vow, ever true to him. He would work his body to the bone in Chickaman, at anything, to earn a grubstake and join her. And there died in him the misgiving of hopelessness which he had nurtured since writing her to Kingdom from Père Morice's cabin at Kwinhagamut, where the monthly mail team stopped. He chided himself, feeling that her indomitable, guiding presence had been obscured by the absorbing and naked, chaotic life of the long trail.

Then his spirits chilled. John would have to stay

in Valdez to safeguard his rights. Could she be going with Ireson, perhaps? Or alone, without any partner? Impossible, that. But did not each trust the other utterly, and had she thus far not avowed her love and faith in him to be stronger than his own toward her? Yet a new wave of depression shook him, rooted somehow in Trueblood's contradictory view of womankind in the dreams of pioneers. Did Dick, so enleagued to Alaska as a partisan of its high destiny, dread woman as a Delilah?

He tore the item from the paper, slipped it into his striped *parka*, and strode restlessly to the cabin-door. From the direction in which the Siwashes had vanished came a grinding, rasping sound, sharpened by the cold. He started toward them through the gloaming. The trail left the charnel houses, entering an open space at the far end of the clearing. All at once the snow seemed to be roughened, corrugated, in even rows by countless little upright boards sticking for a few inches through the crust. Gail stumbled over one of them; rising, he saw that letters had been burned across the wood as if with a hot file: "L. E. Volke, Urbana, Minn. Drowned in Big Chana Creek, May 28, '99. Saved wife in break-up."

The Hocherà graveyard. It appeared to spread around him, larger than the dead city, to encompass it. The cabins were but the shell of this wen upon the vast. The graves were its heart—the mute, immemorial tribute of the unfit to the North.

Slightly dizzy, Gail sat down on a head-board that had fallen over its shallow tomb, to watch the Siwashes. They were huddled, heads down, at the edge of the forest, except the two kids, who were shouting and playing around the yard. He saw a pick-axe and a

long shovel lying on the snow. A new grave had gored the frozen soil. Into this, the old white-haired buck had lowered the cracker-box, and was dropping stony chunks of earth upon it. They made a thudding noise.

He had been following a funeral procession, of creatures who likely for weeks had toted about a child or parent, seeking, in their imitative slavish way, not to bury it upon poles high in the air under a little roof, as their custom of generations is; but choked in the darkness of this tainted soil, among sordid incapables who had come to corrupt their ancient stamina with disease and vice.

The young woman who packed the stove sank upon a stump, head in her hands. The aged man was tying a piece of flour sack, covered with advertising and four big "X's," to a long stick which he had thrust into the filled grave. It was like a flag there in the ashen twilight.

Gail's heart filled with a feverish melancholy, in which death and failure, love and sacrifice, mingled elusively under the spell of womanhood as a strong, benign image of his Clara. He sprang to his feet, and ran, floundering among the head-boards. He plunged on through the forest, until it broke upon the pallid river and the winter trail again. A range of gnomish hills smothered the copper blaze of a low horizon. He "marmucked" wood, and camped alone in the furtive murmur of ice-bound waters. He made tea, slipped into his sleeping-bag.

For weeks, a sense of unreality in all scenes and events had been growing in him. Now it seemed to overpower his mind. But this glad news of Clara, and Dick at their parting, stood vividly before him, the one a trenchant fact, the other an uplifting personality.

Hocherda and the funeral procession receded into that dream of the vanished months. Gail was filled with a thirst for lights and motley sounds, for men preoccupied yet unstriving. He felt a curious stiffness in all his limbs, a heat upon his temples, and craved the relaxations of luxury — a warm bath.

He thought of Trueblood, with his reserve and hardihood, his self-assured ideality for Alaska and men's future there, his penetrating dreaminess — all a dower of the land's inherent wisdom. Dick was what the children of its true pioneers should be. He embodied the stern, portentous beauty of the North. Yet had he not the very softness against which he had warned Gail? Had he no ultimate, immortal aim beneath his fervour?

Gail fell asleep, to the purring of his beans as they boiled on the ashes, to that beloved music of the North's wide spaces. He awoke in an ocean of furry mist, through which the spruces rose dark, coralline, metallic, and the sun was shedding sheafs of silver.

Late that night, a squarish immanence loomed upon the ghostly field of the river. Close to, it became a lightless house built upon a scow. A limp yellow flag marked it as the small-pox hospital which lies outside all big northern camps. The glow of Chickaman, where later he could find no trace of Dick Trueblood, crept up beyond.

CHAPTER XV

SYDNEY

I

THE trail became a maze of cross-tracks. The glow mounted to a glare brighter than any aurora. Undulating steam-clouds seethed vividly above the angular, inky outlines of the cabin-tops.

Would he never get there? It was strange to link time with figured hours. And he had lost the keen desire to sink his limbs into hot water, to eat without first chopping, bending over flames, burning his calloused hands. Life here was to be more — and less — than fortifying the body against death; and the thought of its complexity confused him. That gruelling monotony of months, from which last night he had ached to be free, appeared delectable. He was leaving something of himself, a physical part, behind in the wilderness. He was quitting the insight of unbounded horizons, the source of revelations, the scene of any triumph to be his. He was nearing men, congregated, diffusely self-absorbed; an enervating disorder. He had a sense of ignominy, of abasement, a slight fear.

Now he plodded, a snow-shoe under each arm, among the slovenly shacks of the outskirts. Steam issued from their every chink, from each stovepipe of all the huddled cabins ahead, as from countless volcanic pores. Incandescent lamps lit the long main street of false-fronted saloons and stores, yet only a few frost-wadded windows gleamed faintly into its deserted brightness.

He passed a lone figure, mountainously furred, breathing like a steam valve, his felt shoes crunching on the high board sidewalk. For the first time Gail noticed his own breath, and the cold cut him.

He stopped before a big sign, "The Savoy." A gilt barber-pole leaned from its saw-boards. Miraculous! that gulfed in this arctic waste, men endured this poisonous cold, ate and slept, loved and gamed, as blandly as across the bleak oceans, in warm and jaded cities. Still, he needed a shave. And his hair had not been cut since Hogan, the spiritualist, had crowned him with a china bowl on Manila Fork. But he did not expect the kindly welcome of a gulch cabin in that saloon.

Its blaze of light assaulted and bewildered. The moist heat suffocated. To the right the bar, to the left a barber chair behind a rail, abutted two high, turkey-red and tasseled curtains. These cut off the dance- and gambling-hall in the rear, and as Gail dropped his pack and snow-shoes on the saw-dusted floor, a blare of mechanical and tinny music struck up behind them. A square-jawed, pock-marked stout man in a grey cardigan jacket was labelling demijohns on the bar. At a table behind the rail, a kinky-haired youth in a blue miner's shirt and a starched collar was impatiently throwing himself "cold" hands, as if the rag-time had interrupted his talk with the barber, who was honing a razor — a sleekish, dark person with up-curved moustaches, under a brown derby hat.

Gail shed his *parka*, nightgown-wise, and climbed into the padded chair. Without a greeting, the barber dropped his strop, and digging a comb into Gail's matted locks, said to the young man,

"Say, Len, old Connie was the swellest bitch I ever see. That spring when she died out to Willow Crick,

with pups festering in her, she made three trips to my ground on the Yanaga, as leader." And the claim-owning barber minutely detailed the sled-dog's exploits and death.

Len took this as the text of a bantering comparison between dogs and men, at the expense of chechawko mining experts. Gail grew drowsy in the glare of the mirror before him, which portrayed pointed spruces drawn in soap, under a stuffed fox and cloth flowers in vases on a shelf above, clippers and bottles below. In pauses of the piano and the scrape of dancing feet, the hollow grind of roulette marbles, exclamations that started a rumble of voices issued from the red curtains. Having his back to them, Gail could only hear the strident drawl of the girls as each led her "boob" to the bar, accepting port wine and her percentage cheque. It sickened him, but he was seized by a fierce impulse to throw off the barber's bib, follow a girl behind the curtains, seize and dance her.

"Six bits," said the barber, finishing, as Gail, on his feet once more was trying to recognise himself through the soapy trees. He both felt and saw his sharp cheeks blanch. His hands slapped the empty buckskin in the region of his pockets. Money! He had forgotten such a thing!

"Here, Sig," said Len, compassing Gail's discomfort in a flash, and threw two silver cart-wheels on his table. "I'll stake the sour-dough. Hold him — put under obligations to the house."

For some time, continually drinking rock-and-rye, his voice had been growing hesitant and abstracted. Now Len fixed his boyish eyes upon Gail. Wide-apart, slanted downward at the corners, something in their indecisive hue at once obstinate and weak, impressed

him, a look of wasted intelligence in his well-cut features, which only a roughened skin saved from being womanly.

"I don't know as I can pay you right off," began Gail, "unless I get a job." But his benefactor cut in,

"Steep, ain't it, for a dump like this?" and gave a wink which included the boss behind the bar. Then he swept Gail rapidly with uncertain eyes, and rolled a cigarette with the same trepid haste in which his old bunkie Rex used to.

"If this camp is as empty as she looks," said Gail, "maybe I'll get a chance for work to-morrow."

"Oh, the's always work in a morgue," encouraged Len, with a grin toward the demijohns. "If only polishing the glass coffins, eh, Overheiser?"

Overheiser put down his jug, and fixing leaden eyes upon Gail, growled that all Chickaman was up on the creeks, burning ground — thawing pay gravel for the spring clean-up. The town had been a live wire up to a month ago, and would be again in April, when the stampeders began to leave the played-out camps, because Yanaga River to the south'ard of here was another Klondike, sir, but permanent, on account of the quartz.

"You give our partner a job shifting icicles out of all the dust you take in till then, Joe," said Len. "He won't freeze his fingers."

"He ken sweep out around the tables mornings if he's minded to," said the boss, gruffly. "Four dollars a day, and board himself."

"Take it," muttered Len to Gail. "It's a cleaner job than I have here." And Gail was moved by the earnest intent to help him, the sudden self-deprecation.

"I'll go you for a week, anyhow," he said, with a

forced carelessness; and then, boldly picking up the change which Sig the barber had thrown down, and with it Len's other dollar, Gail said to the latter, "I can square you, at any rate."

"Show up at nine — the morning," mumbled the boss, ducking his head under the bar.

"Pull out for Yanaga, when you've scraped a grub-stake?" asked Len. "Plenty of power-o'-attorney capitalists'll be looking for strong hands at the gold-pan in this stampede. We're on the *ground first*, remember. A man don't hit it like this more'n once in a wolf's age." His thin-lidded eyes flashed, and the edge of an extravagant, golden vision swept Gail. Len showed a real ardour, strange in a youth so clearly sophisticated, and not wholly due to drink. "And Joe Overheiser ain't such a bear," he confided. "Stick to him. Have you got a bunk?"

Gail, flustered, shook his head.

"They'll sting you three large iron dollars a flop in any of our ladder Waldorfs," said Len, "and no boots allowed in the bunks. How about Nixon Mac's — over his stable?" Len raised his voice toward Overhesier, but without response, so went on: "Mac's freighting up the cricks. He left me his key." Len drew it from a pocket, handed it to Gail. "Two locations round the first corner, as you came off the trail. Then follow your nose. How'd a night in Chicago strike you now — Auditorium bar, and then a show?"

A cadaverous wreck of a man, his sunken mouth moist with tobacco, had appeared between the curtains, nodding Len within. Without another word, he vanished behind them. The piano struck up again, more softly.

"That's Borden's job, at the ivories, turn about with

that old crimp," observed Overheiser, emerging behind the bar. "And d'ye know who Len is? Senator Borden's son, of Wyoming. Why, he c'd tickle the wireless to his old man, and cash in enough to grubstake this whole saloon."

"Got too nice a touch for beating that box," said the barber from behind a newspaper. "Shows the elegant folks he was raised with."

"But his pride hurts him. And he was pulling up on 'dills' and the booze, till this woman grabs him. Now he's owned. A man ain't a man, took so in this country. And now she's made a home for him, on a squint at the Senator's pocket." Overheiser paused. "But Len'll only stand for so much. Said tonight he'd gave her her walking papers — for the fourth time. So he's drunk. Ought to hit out for the cricks."

Gail's concern for the volatile black sheep was being further awakened, when he caught sight of the big clock over the bar, its hands folded upon midnight.

"Guess I'll be rustling some grub," he said, picking up his outfit.

"Have a rope?" He took the cigar that Joe offered.

Outside, the cold withered Gail. He thought: "Why do men help me so? What is my appeal?" In his heart of hearts, for his own great end, he had always felt that he possessed some masterful quality, marking him apart from his fellows. But he had never expected others to recognise this, to feel it, to show it. And least of all, one like Len Borden.

II

On a diagonal corner, Gail ate wheat-cakes, gulped two thick mugs of coffee, at the tiny oil-cloth table of a

"restaurant" smoky with lard. The diminutive cross-eyed man who served him also ran a news-stand, and waxed voluble over some drunkard who had been cruising up the creeks for him, selling last year's magazines at a dollar each, and lately piked over the Wildhorse divide with the gains.

Opposite, Gail spotted the "California Baths." The opening door jangled a bell, and he found himself in a room with a bright ingrain carpet and decorated with dried grasses. An elderly, battered-looking woman in black sat warming her feet at a coal base-burner with a piped copper boiler on top. Two others lolled on a low settee, the larger holding in her lap a clear-skinned boy about eight years old, dressed in a sort of reindeer skin sailor suit.

As the first arose with a weary nod, twisted a damper over the stove and disappeared down a passage in the rear, Gail noticed that the smaller and younger of her visitors had been crying. She wore grey squirrel-skins and a big hat with long white ostrich plumes. She had the round, enameled features of her kind under an abrupt bang, which gave her a look at once doll-like and wanton. Her light blue eyes were equally soft and cruel, innocent and shrewd; appealing.

But it was the sight of the boy — the first white child Gail had seen since he could remember — that dazed him for a moment. There was something fawn-like, tender, exquisite, in that little figure, beside which the eternal youths of the trail, even Dick, seemed false and haggard. He was young, divine! All the future breathed there, as he smeared his face with the dough-nut he was eating, and his wandering clear gaze dulled and hardened the women's eyes. An aching warmth

spread through Gail's bosom, a hateful jealousy at their possession of him.

"Well, Sydney, I never would have expected such feelings in you," said the older, who held the kid, with a deliberate sympathy, eyeing Gail boldly. In her red *parka*, she might have passed for a strong-minded spinster, except for the deep perpendicular lines in her cheeks, and a moist redness about her mouth.

Sydney, the younger woman, hid her head.

The battered lady reappeared with towels over her arm, and beckoned Gail down the entry. There she unlocked the door of a cubicle all but filled by a white tub, and placed the towels on a stool, by a chunk of soap and a vegetable sponge. As Gail undressed, and she shook down the stove, he could hear, over the open top of his closet, the voices of the pair seated. They began to review the times that they had gone broke in various camps; relishing, like men, the adventure of their hardships. The younger told with a loose hoarseness about a French Count who ran a moving picture show, with which as box-office lady she had come to grief: "Aristidy, he called himself, got that hot at the drunk in the audience, he starts for him with his gun, but first chucking his cigarette butt into the tub of films by the gas-tank. And say, Mrs. Frances Mueller, when I gets outside into that gang of yelling rough-necks, my hair was a-fire. Well, it was him in a *kamaleika* who smothered me out that brings me to this camp, an' all these troubles."

She began to sob again, harshly. Gail, luxuriating in the steamy water, laving his long smooth legs, his thin and corded torso, could not repress a smile, in his knowledge of such a one's easy emotions. Then Mrs. Mueller related how she had bet and lost all one

summer's earnings in the long-distance dog-race from Candle Creek, on a phony tip from a man who had set her up to an oyster-loaf supper. Soon their voices sank, and from the curt negatives of the proprietress, Gail guessed that they were questioning her about himself. Then Mrs. Mueller, after a long harangue, hushed but vigorous, all at once advised ostentatiously —

“Now, Sydney, you got to hustle or starve. I'd play for him myself, if I wasn't selling my hash-house up on the crick and pulling out of town. I like his Chink eye-brows and that wild look. And mebbe he ain't so broke as he seems.” Gail felt his face grow hotter than the water. “Where's your old nerve? Take a prospect, anyhow.”

He thought that he heard a step in the corridor, and stopped splashing. Suddenly, “Now you come right back here, Sydney!” broke out Mrs. Mueller with a coarse snigger.

Gail caught a scraping sound outside his door, then a thump, as of feet landing on the oil-cloth of the passage. Could he have seen a white feather waving over the open top of the cubicle? He flung out his arm, turned on the cold water spigot, and soon was dressing feverishly. When he came out to pay for his bath, Sydney was standing by the stove. She still had on her squirrel coat and the hat, but Mrs. Mueller had taken off her red *parka*, and seated in a pair of buckskin knickerbockers, with her short greyish hair, and the fuzz on her chin, looked ridiculously mannish. Both their heads were averted in a strained silence, but as Gail received the change to his last dollar from the proprietress, the kid bounced across the room to him.

"You didn't bring no clean clothes in your pack, did you?" he asked.

"No, son. I—I got to rustle for them yet," answered Gail.

"Arthur! You leave him alone," ordered Sydney.

"Is he yours?" demanded Gail boldly. "The little shaver?"

"Mine? What makes you think so?" she replied likewise, but her glance seemed to flinch. "He don't look like me, does he?"

"I'll give you some duds," the boy burst out roguishly, plugging a fist into one of Gail's extended palms; and at the touch of his skin, the room wavered. But instantly Mrs. Mueller rose, grabbed Arthur; held him, sullen and crest-fallen, back-to at the settee.

"You're a-coming with me?" whispered Sydney to Gail with an effort, and yet shamelessly, her shiny cheeks deepening in hue. She was drawing on a pair of black seal gloves, and furtively inclined her head to the door. "You look like you'd treat a girl square."

That reckless desire flared through him, which he had had in the barber chair, hearing the couples at the bar. Their heads were close together.

"Yes," Gail broke out, huskily. "But whose kid is he, then?"

"Why, mine, dear," spoke up Mrs. Mueller, blandly. "Ain't you, Arthur?" But the boy, kicking rebelliously at her seat, remained squelched. "Why shouldn't he be mine?" she reproached, with a hideous archness.

Sydney had slipped her hand into his, as he lifted his pack. The bell on the door jingled behind them, to a scathing outbreak of suppressed feelings on propriety from the lady in black, hurled at Mrs. Mueller.

They crunched along, silent, in the inhuman cold. The shacks thinned, but the board sidewalk became higher and broader. A dreary swamp surrounded the two rows of one-story houses, each exactly alike. The single window in some was obscured by a yellow shade; in others this was up; but nearly all were brightly lighted. Gail understood the custom.

"The boy's not yours?" he demanded angrily once more.

Sydney only squeezed his hand. In the losing struggle that consumed his being, he grasped at this as a denial.

She led him into one of the little houses, lit the gaudy lamp on the bright, fringed table-cloth. Not novel were the ornate gilt things on the mantel over the stove, the lithographed advertisements, the coarse lace spread on the big bed. In a chair, face down, lay an open book: "*Les Miserables*. V. Hugo."

She took off the white plumes. Her bleached hair was frizzled, oily. In the faint smell of frying and of face-powder, was something unseating to his brain. . . . He loathed himself, was mad. Exactly thus he had showed his prime weakness in the old days. Had he forgotten his regeneration by the North? Chastened by its valorous lessons, could he now be so corrupted and vitiated, surrender to the sterile and the unfit?

Suddenly the touch of her blue silk scarf seemed to burn him. He was seized by a fierce revulsion. He stiffened, under a terrible recoil of conscience; of trust, of loyalty. He thrust her roughly from him, and turning without a word or glance behind, leaped to the door.

The cold re-enveloped him. In the distance arose the lingering, heart-piercing wail of wolf-dogs.

He reviled himself, in the name of Martha, of Clara, who had faith in him, the partner of his great thirst! He felt a wave of the love she bore and its all-effacing potency. He had almost yielded, to no more than the physical clamour of a long-pent vitality. This Sydney was a Delilah of the North, the sort Dick feared — likely Dick had never known a purer. No wonder the boy's grasp of womankind was so unformulated and distrustful. It was he who needed a good woman's love to requite his dumb aspiring.

At last Gail found the empty stable, a large frame building clumsily covered with tar-paper. The key that Borden had given him fitted a small door beside the closed big ones. He felt his way up a narrow stair. In the dusty, icy loft, he discerned an electric lamp, and switched it on. Dog harnesses, broken oat-sacks, pack-saddles, a couple of scythes were strewn about. A bran-like film covered everything. In one corner red blankets were jumbled on a cot. His head burned and throbbed, as he undid his pack. He had been in Chickaman four hours, but it seemed to him as many years.

Gail lodged here until mid-April, nursing his dreams of gold and Clara, earning an insufficient grub-stake in Joe Overheiser's saloon.

III

From this night on, Len Borden pulled up on his drinking. His friends in the Savoy appeared to assume that this was because the quarrel which he had had then with his woman actually had been final, and that he had dropped her. With the reserve of sobriety, he seldom continued his confidences to Gail, and for weeks their friendship remained tentative.

Toward each noon, in the reek of stale booze and expectoration, as Gail ended bending with mop and broom over the filth of the big hall behind the red curtains — sweeping the baize crap tables, scattering damp saw-dust — he would meet Len gulping his morning cocktail at the bar. Then, after soup and pie at the cross-eyed man's, Gail would wander silent, observant, along the glaring street, among the furred multitude. It increased daily, melting into the "Northern," the "Tanana," the "Malemute," into his own Savoy. There, from behind Sig Hamilton's rail, Gail watched the new-comers to the camp cluster before the serious Joe, as Len, loosening his nimble tongue with rock-and-rye, read their histories from feature and get-up, satirising each with a playful cynicism. The hollow-cheeked, painted ladies dribbled downstairs to their tragic trade. Newt-eyed faro dealers in black alpaca slinked behind the curtains.

The generous Overheiser usually asked Gail to supper. In a front room above, off the long, thin-partitioned corridor with its many doors, he ate moose-steak with Sig and Len also. They would rally Ah Fong, the cook, as a squire of squaws, because he traded the meat from Siwashes. But Joe never spoke of women; they palled on him, Gail judged, as indispensable vampires in his business. Yet in the lapel of his cardigan jacket he wore the button photograph of a young girl with her hair in pig-tails. She was his daughter at school in Los Angeles, Len had told Gail, adding, "They say Joe robbed the till of a bar down there, but he'd shoot himself sooner than let out any fake news about a gold strike."

Afterwards, Gail often visited Sydney "up the slue." But neither one encouraged any shameful conduct. At

first Gail believed that this was due, on her part, to his failure as an investment; on his own, less to will power than to that numb daze which overcomes one on relaxing from the grind of the winter trail. Later, her lack of pretence in the hollow vanities of her type moved his interest and curiosity in her humanity. She said that she needed a friend. She failed to amplify this; so Gail repudiated an ugly suspicion of her friendly purposes, and they became intimates, on a basis too outspoken even for altruism on his part.

He would sit under her lamp, to the tick of her fake ormolu clock, as her hoarse, plaintive voice ranged from telling of her speculations in diamond rings and "jumped" town-lots, to her adoration of "Javver" in "*Les Miserables*." But Gail was as reticent about himself, both in Alaska and on the outside, as he was to his friends of the Savoy, where no rumour of his deeds had penetrated. He shrank in her presence from mentioning the boy Arthur, or Mrs. Mueller, who was "decent now," trying to sell her road-house on Cache Creek. And knowing that the axiom of her profession is silence regarding its male victims, neither one ever spoke of any men in the camp. Yet it continued to puzzle Gail why she had cried so bitterly on the night of their meeting, encouraged no visitors except himself, and sometimes disappeared from Chickaman for days.

One evening Len came to supper, drunk. Generally so garrulous, he sat black and speechless, scowling at the immaculate Hamilton. As Gail started downstairs, Len drew him aside, and, his slant, wide-apart eyes hazy with emotion, said of Sig: "I'll kill that pimp . . . if he breaks in on my dill." And abruptly dashed below to his piano.

This was the first word that Len had spoken to him

about the woman who had "owned" him, whom Gail had hardly heard reference to since the night of his arrival in Chickaman. But he had lately observed a growing coolness between Len and the barber. And Sig's ways with women did not seem to be most men's. More than his trade had enervated him, yet not physically, for he would boast uncontradicted of his prowess on the trail. Gossip charged him with having been a Mormon "run out of New Mexico," and as a silent partner of Big Sadie, who loaned the other girls of the house cash in anticipation of their harvests in percentage checks.

Tonight as Gail approached Sydney's, men were chopping wood in many of the yards behind the little houses. He knew that later he might meet the same beings throwing dice downtown, on the money earned thus for supplying the stoves of the fluffed, overdressed creatures, whom he could see through the windows with shades up, reading before them. Suddenly he realised that he had come to consider all of them aside from their degradation, as adventurers caught in much the same net of life as his own.

But Sydney's shade also was up. Never before had he seen it so. He could make out no one inside; still, he paused with an odd timidity before knocking. But he was unprepared for the surprise that followed. The boy Arthur, startled and fragile in his reindeer furs, opened the door.

A tightness struck across Gail's throat. "I thought you were up on Cache with your mother," he stammered. "Where's the other — Sydney?"

"Mother?" the boy asked shyly. A quizzical wrinkle crossed his small forehead. Then, recognising Gail in his new yellow mackinaw, his brown eyes widened.

He broke Gail's spell of mingled joy and apprehension by adding with a grin, "So you won't need my clothes now. Come on in."

"I mean her friend, who lives here." The boy was alone.

Arthur's face fell, and his cheeriness vanished. He closed the door behind Gail, with a mature gesture of welcome.

"Sit down, mister," said the child gravely. "An' I'll tell you."

Gail sank into Sydney's rocker, stiffly, his blighting heart in his mouth.

"Mrs. Mueller — she's pulling out for Fairbanks tomorrow," declared Arthur, manfully, but averting his face toward the stove. "An' with me. We're down staying over the 'Malemute.'"

In gathering anger for his blindness, Gail choked back an unreasoning, instinctive oath.

"But she's not mother," cried the boy, fretfully. "This is mother's, of course."

The room lurched before Gail. He felt his heart go icy, and that he was staring interminably through a warm mist.

"Come here," he said thickly; but the boy, with downcast eyes, revealed only his quivering lips.

"Why did she lie —?" he broke out aimlessly. "Why didn't she tell me when I asked her in the bath?"

"You better ask her that yourself," retorted Arthur. "Hadn't you oughter know?"

"Don't!" Gail shielded his face with his hands. The boy had lifted a defiant head. A sudden stoniness in his young, melting eyes, the twitching at the corners of his tender mouth, pierced Gail like a knife. . . .

Born dead in innocence! The infamy! . . . "Then why didn't you let on?" he cried.

"Mrs. Mueller said that if I ever told — they'd lick the life outen me — the both of them." His voice wavered into sobs, and he flung himself into Gail's outstretched arms.

Gail felt the pitiless air from the swamp outside; heard the door shut, as if at a great distance. A pale, swimming vision resolved itself into Sydney in her white hat and coat, standing before him, reaching her arms for Arthur's collar. Her hard, round cheeks were drawn and livid, her eyes half-closed. Speechless, she drew him away from Gail. The boy yielded, limply, as Gail fought a wild impulse to strike her from her child. Then the woman rasped,

"Arthur! How dared you to come here. I told you never — Get out now — Oh! I can't stand it. . . . Gail, help me!"

She sank upon her bed. Gail heard the boy steal over to her, and their lips meet briefly. "I had to come, mother," he said; and without a word or look toward him, Arthur strode through the door, closing it gently behind him.

IV

"I thought better — even of you," breathed Gail, when he could find words.

She threw off her coat, flung her hat on the floor, gave a rumpling dab at her bang, and began throatily:

"We've got to live, we women, and in the only way we know how. To eat and keep warm like other creatures. There in the bath I thought I'd lose you, if you knew who Arthur was, as I'd just lost the man I loved — the only one ever — by telling him."

"But a mother—" Gail lashed her. "A mother like that's a fiend."

"Don't I know I am?" she muttered on, tossing her arms. "I be'n called that before, and by men worse'n you. I sent for Arthur from the Home in Juneau—I never seen him since he was born there eight years ago—because I reckoned I could hold my devil, by stirring the father feelings in him. I knew a girl in Fairbanks won back her man so. But his seeing Arthur only made him chuck me, with a great holler about motherhood and decency. Damn your educated boys. They never play the game like a woman who respects her business."

"Sydney!" pleaded Gail.

"Oh, yes, my seeing Arthur broke me up just as much, too. I never expected that just the sight of the little feller—" she paused, overcome. . . . "But in the bath there I was desperate—for food—and Frances Mueller egged me on and made us lie to you. Mebbe you thought I wasn't hurted and hating you like poison after your play with Arthur, and we'd walked here. But hunger's hunger, and the's more competition in our trade—even by squaws—than folks suspect. I ain't got no use for the brand of girl that bluffs she's better than her job."

"You were crying that night because the man you loved had left you?"

"For my devil? No! When a girl like us loves a feller, it's as though she had some raw place inside her. She don't cry for losing him, unless she's drunk. She breaks loose and rips things up, sees red like a man and shoots to kill. But I'd done all that. You've seen me tame enough. You ought to catch me in action. Men thinks us fickle, but mostly our show of it

is — torture." She stopped short; her voice faltered, "I was crying that night because I was having to give up Arthur, and go back to the life."

Gail bent his head. He had thought that he understood the hectic passions of her ilk. But this dumb-founded him.

"Of course we know the mother's love, the same as decent women. But the life dulls us. The business takes it out of you. We don't get any chance. . . . And mebbe I don't know my job, or haven't any right being in it. Mebbe I'm too much a woman, or not sunk low enough, or don't know you hypocrites of men." She broke off in bitter irony.

"Have I been — that?" enunciated Gail, after a while.

"You?" she smiled blandly. "It was you that give me the first straight days of living since I was a girl at school — when I found out you was broke, and the kind of man you are. It was you saved me from the river. And Frances, by taking the kid and giving in to grubstake me for a time. But now she's going away, taking Arthur with her. I can't have him with me, and I've got to go back — or starve."

The words choked her. Her small, flint-blue eyes filled. Her reddened lips trembled, and seeming to shrivel behind the paint, all her shrewd wantonness effaced itself.

Gail tried to speak, but failed. In the silence, she jerked up her head, and he was aware of the ease with which she pulled herself together.

"So you got to go now," she said firmly, rising. "This ends it for us. I'm expecting my new feller any minute. Didn't you see the shade up?"

He felt suddenly the evanescence of all her emotion,

and it killed his pity. After all, she was, as she said, blunted.

He groped for the door. The lashing cold outside, under the lances of the arctic stars, relievingly pierced his veins. He thought of Hoherda. Sydney, too, was the North's toll. But she had survived. Only Arthur, to forecast his life in the Youngest World was maddening.

Was she so irredeemable? No — his faith in woman was too strong. Yet why should her perversions concern him and his sustaining dreams? His softness, as with Tom and Jonesy, had caught him in this more deadening web of life. He strove to make his mind a blank, and started back to the heart of Chickaman, to lose himself with the multitudes inside its bleak dives.

But at the second corner, he passed a familiar figure across the street, headed up the slue. The brown derby and the fastidious step were unmistakable — Sig Hamilton's. A horrid certainty seized Gail. Sydney was waiting for the barber. Gail could not leave the district. Three times he started back along the walk toward the little shacks, but returned to the corner. Finally, as he approached Sydney's house, he saw that the yellow shade was now down. Hamilton had gone inside. But on the steps, a figure lay inert and huddled on his face. His heart stood still. The blind fool he had been! It was Len, dead drunk.

Len, Sydney's "devil" !

A sudden, destructive idea overcame him. He lifted the limp man in his arms, carried him up the steps. Len opened his eyes, and seeming to recognise him, mumbled Sydney's name, gratefully. Then, dropping him on the threshold, Gail dealt a thundering blow with

his fist on the door, and hearing its thin timbers crackle, leaped down the steps and away.

v

Behind the Savoy's red curtains, under the stamped tin ceiling, Gail circulated through the indistinct, subdued uproar of gambling; of strangle-hold dancing to the agile fingers of the corpse-white Lummis. He had no hankering for the soft, gaunt-limbed women, dressed as if in bathing suits; as to Joe, Gail told himself, they were too much a part of his daily life and work either to repel or allure. But he searched the men's faces; avid, resolute, manly, young; faces with the deep, decisive lines, which made them so sad yet undaunted, of hardship and renunciation; faces flabby and sensual, sullen and desperate from having winced at the point of surrender to the somnolent cold — gathered in that stale, bluish smoke, and the odour of ill-cured furs. Chips clicked, dice bounded softly; chamois pokes of gold-dust gently thudded, to settle or invest, on the oil-cloth of the dazing wheels; the delicate brass scales tinkled. They who played at once became silent and conscious, as the focus of gazing walls of set and open-mouthed faces, whose eyes epitomised all the drama of human credulity.

Then, in one corner, broke out the sudden dispute. The crowd clustered; and Gail, craning over its edge, heard the thick oaths, saw the white, corded faces. Came the flash and report of the gun, the lights crashing out at another (fired by an onlooker); shrieks from the dolled dancers wearily swinging at the edges of death. . . . Joe hulked among them; instantly, with a strong-armed litheness amazing in such a man, restored a tense, cowed order, as though perfunctorily.

And with the inherent sanity of all mobs, this one tonight dissolved toward the bar, instead of to Gash's hospital.

It was animal, masculine, passionate; there was none of the brooding acquiescence of Occidental Avenue, of the frontier in its decay. Men selfishly exulted in their bodies, seeking a crude and thoughtless happiness — violently, if challenged — in this absorbing realm of gold and chance. No man's brawn was pledged to any but himself; none sauntered, slouching, dejected, with sinews for sale, their faces graven by isolation from home and kin. If the chug of a No. 2 drill beat in any one's head, it was striking open sesame to his own eldorado. All their failures had ever been paid in the spur of a blinder courage, the cheer of more extravagant dreams. No man demanded idleness of the world at a chosen wage, nor grudged the success of his fellows. No flavour was abroad of waste, or greed, or the bluster of vain boasts and paper credit. Life was rooted in the one indomitable faith of gold, burning in all men's blood. An eager restlessness, a jealous, unflinching zeal, bound them to the enchanted heritage of our last, heroic empire.

Yet the breed of Hochoerda — wastrels of the older camps — mingled here, indistinguishably, with Gail's brother voyagers from the winter vast. All, in this hiatus before the stampede south to the Yanaga, appeared as in a mirror that distorted slightly; that cast over life a deceiving film, which, beside its starkness on the trail, rearoused Gail's reluctance on entering the town a month ago. Was not life here furtively a menace to one who clung to such inordinate dreams as his? He saw himself struggling with Bob upon Mt. Lincoln, or hearing John Hartline's indictment against Lamar.

A disgust filled him. Yet did the deadening hum all about block the immortality of any man who did not deserve to die, whose future already was not blasted? Here was the field for neither charity nor death. And not here could be worked out his destiny, and the future of the Youngest World. He must be gone into the wilderness!

Gail slipped out into the cold. He had not yet earned half enough for a grubstake. No men had offered him an outfit, to stake claims for them under powers of attorney. He saw himself hardly closer to the Yanaga's gravels than when Clara, or Len, had touched his visions with their talk of gold. Yet these, visiting him incessantly, had not blighted. As he crunched back to the stable, he thought of Arthur and Sydney. A tender despair filled his soul. And then he found himself laughing grimly, irresponsibly, at the thought of Sig behind that yellow shade, facing Len — and the quality of passion which Sydney had confessed for him.

VI

Near noon the next morning, Gail leaned against the Savoy's barber pole in a throng of argonauts. Chicka-man now overflowed with them. Each day in increasing numbers they arrived and hit the Yanaga trail. But neither Len nor Sig had shown up at Overheiser's. Outside it, in the glare of Roosevelt Avenue, two outfits on the eve of pulling out — a gang of Minnesota Norwegians and a party of French Kanucks in scarlet toques and sashes — were matching their dog-teams. Each lead-dog, hitched singly to his sled, was trying to budge the rising mound of flour-sacks that men piled on it. Bets were being staked. The accents of two

races, grotesque in their excitement, rose above the babel of advice and comment from the furred spectators on the board-walk; especially of a lank, red-faced Sowe-gian in a green-flowered mackinaw, and of a scrubby little *habitant* with a black moustache, addressed as Sin-jon, whose lithe and snow-white malemute got a favourite's encouragement. One Jim McTighe, hang-jawed and in a patched *parka* (a bucket-shop king, in Alaska for his health), was making book on the contest, mingling with the crowd, insistent in his coarse, biting wit which had defined him half as a buffoon, half as the philosopher of camp.

But as always in this multitude, Gail sharpened his ears to the hushed undercurrents of talk that never failed to hold him spellbound and prick his dreams; the talk of gold and bedrock, discovery stakes, porphyry and mica-schist; of dogs and their intelligence, endurance, as against horses, whose price was fabulous. But today for the first time his faith in triumphing through these things began to flag, and a desperation alloyed his dreams of eldoradoes.

Then from an edge of the crowd he sighted another dog-team down the street, hitched up and waiting in front of the "Malemute." As he started idly to walk toward it, two figures emerging from the resort checked his steps. One was a woman, striding man-like in her red *parka*: Mrs. Mueller. She led Arthur by the hand. Gail's heart began to throb and a hot lump rose in his throat. He could not, could not, go to them. Why should either the little shaver or he, each so without sentiment, suffer at a parting? A stout man in a freighter's worn and tawny furs whipped up the dogs, and Gail watched them, through the mist before his eyes, swing away in a cloud of snow.

Turning, he spotted Sig Hamilton. The barber was slinking through the assemblage before the Savoy. He limped; and as he vanished into the side-door that led to the rooms upstairs, Gail could not curb his relish at the derby hat battered and squashed upon his black ear-mufflers, and the bandanna that swathed one eye.

Then an arm was thrust through his, dragging him forward. Gail looked up into Len's clean-cut, pale face.

"I want to talk with you," he said. "I got to."

A roar of voices around many erect and fluffy tails greeted the climax of the dog-contest. But Len, silent and absorbed, led Gail into the saloon and behind the red curtains. There was no liquor on his breath, yet his frank, uncertain eyes showed how febrile and distraught he was. He sat at the battered piano in the sour hall and touched the keys.

"That herd out there—" he began, satirically. "'Ole Olesons' that can't write the bearings on their claim-stakes, but see themselves back in Saint-e Paul, getting the state governor drunk. They talk like every place they pitch their stoves 'ud melt the snow over another Nome. . . . The hell with this Yanaga! It's like all the rest of these strikes. Fattening to Overheiser's pocket, and every fool's dreams."

He started in to crumble the repute and promise of the Yanaga as a gold-field. Toward it, for the first time, a vein of sneering and grim bitterness darkened the usual light touch of his cynicism and playful humour which had rather endeared him to most argonauts. Then, still vouchsafing no confidence concerning Sig and Sydney, he veered to telling of his boyhood in Omaha, but without mention of his parents; and of studying at a law college. Next of two years with breeders and jockeys on a racetrack circuit; of the acid-

throwing in a Chicago hotel over a pool-room man's wife, which forced his enlistment in the Philippines; his coming North as "scout" in an Army exploring party. He had stayed on here, enslaved by women, drink, and the fitful, bewildering glamour of new placers — in that careless, hectic life of rush camps, whose intensity of the moment, Gail saw, divining alike his stamina and weakness, alone made life tolerable to him.

"And any time I wanted I could go home," he confessed, finally, but with an impulsive effort, as he mockingly played the last bars of a "mother" song. "But something always keeps me. Often nights I try to figure out what it is. Yet I'm always stumped, unless—" he hesitated, waving a trembling, cigarette-stained hand to the white peaks in the promised land of the Yanaga, dimly visible through the grimy window, "unless the look and feeling in hills like them has a power—" He paused, suddenly serious; but only further goaded Gail's amazement by adding: "Yet fake or no, I'm going into that Yanaga country, right off."

"There alone?" asked Gail, his eyes intent on the foul floor, his head awl with envy.

"Anyway, with none of this crowd," Len asserted. "I ain't the part of them that you are. They don't know whether to laugh or shoot me when I 'pan' their dead-sure nugget talk. They favour me because they think I'm gutless, and it always touches their pity to see a man owned by a rounder. But they don't like me because they suspect I get money from the Senator. They've seen enough of remittance men down on the Coast. Of course I do cash in from the old man, or I couldn't have bought this outfit."

"Outfit — already?"

"Doing what else on the quiet all these sober mornings, but buying dogs and grub and truck?" he demanded. "There's probably nothing in it for either of us. I'm not wise to you, either, except that you seem hard and honest and different from the rest here. What odds? But will you come in with me as a partner? That's the proposition. It's my outfit. Well, we'll go halves on the yellow stuff we find."

Gail felt all his veins fill and burn. Would he! It was unbelievable. Exuberant, inordinate anticipations swept him; a host of intimations that now all his longing and aspiration would be attained. Yet he was so dazed and overcome that he did not grasp the full meaning in this good fortune of which he had so long despaired, or even link Clara with it, until after he had returned to the stable. He did not know in what terms he eagerly accepted and thanked Len, whose next words that Gail heard were:

"Then show up in front of here early tomorrow. Joe Overheiser'll have the team loaded and ready." He rose from the worn plush stool. "I'm off now to putting the last touches to my woman."

"Her?" Gail started at the expected subject, now reduced to insignificance. "You mean Sydney?"

"Right! And I want to thank you for what you did last night, and for being so straight and decent with her while she and I were on the outs. I guess that barber won't be seeing out of his right lamp for a week," he chuckled. "It wasn't I that flicked him, either. It was she — you know the ways of the breed — after I told her I'd come back and live with her for keeps."

"But you're not," exclaimed Gail with misgiving, "if we're hitting the trail."

"On your life, no!" laughed Len. "It's a plant.

But I'm making her think I stick by her. I ain't got any nerve to break away in the open paddock. She'd kick up so. Can't you see her fly off the handle, finding she's left at the post? If I stayed on here I'd kill that woman."

"You think it's safe to 'con' her?" Gail interposed. "She told me how she feels toward you."

"Don't teach me about women," broke in Len, making for the red curtains. "And fix up your dunnage for daylight."

All that afternoon Gail, like a man in a dream, spent his earnings buying new snow-shoes, socks, snow-glasses, tobacco. Overheiser had gone up on Cache Creek to trade furs, so he ate at the cross-eyed man's, and returned early to the stable to patch up his trail clothes. He was in the midst of this, sewing a rip in the sleeve of the fringed rawhide jacket that Hartline had given him, reflecting in his still exalted mood upon that indefinable quality in himself which seemed to draw men to him, to make him the undeserving means (as with Tom Guiteau) of their regeneration, when he heard the soft yet heavy thud of moccasins running swiftly up the stairs.

No step but his own had touched them in the month that he had lodged in the dusty disorder of the loft. It could be none other than Nixon Mac, at last returning; and in a moment a big red-haired Scotsman in a round otter cap and with a shoe-brush beard stood before him, vociferously pronouncing that name and Gail's own.

"Mak'd yourself the home, son, I hope," he said with a gruff kindness, throwing off his red-lined leather jacket, and unstrapping the telescope bag which he had. "I kotched a sight av Borden down to Joe's."

"I owe the both of you a lot," Gail responded consciously. "Len and I pull out for the Yanaga tomorrow."

Mack turned and eyed him. "With that dude — yer tellin' me?" he said doubtfully, rubbing his large nose. "Ain't it rayther past time fer him? Yanaga, hey?" he resumed in reflection, pulling a moose-hide poke from the valise. "I'm flyin' in from there a-foot. Mind to this — from them square-head locators. Thirty ounces for mickle 500 pounds of flour." And he poured a stream of coarse gold into the cover of the bag.

Gail's bosom swelled. Even in the dim light the rough peas and flat slugs of yellow metal seemed to blind his bulging eyes. He yielded to all his latent fever of acquisition, set throbbing by Len, which had transfigured the past hours. It seemed that already this granular radiance was his own possession, the tangible crown of a splendid life ahead. It cast over him an hypnotic spell, which distorted all sense of the silent time for which his sight was rooted on the gold. And then, finally, there broke through his dazzlement, the deeper, life-fulfilling import of his new future. And that dawned slowly and reproachfully through the haze of his exalted state, and he revealed the core and cause of his elation in words that halted.

"Mark how they're dark nuggets, like the Forty-mile stuff," said the Scotch freighter, at last.

"Yes, yes," panted Gail. "But are there any outfits coming in there from the south? From Cook Inlet — Beluga — by way of Tsana River? Any women?" he added, trembling.

"Lots of them, mon, lots. And however tough," Mac grinned, oblivious of Gail's excitement, as he re-

placed the treasure in its sack, "I call them the aristocracy of any stampede. They give it a homelike flavour."

"You didn't see, or hear of a girl —" Gail blurted, lifting a burning gaze, "with yellow eyes — and no partner . . . named Hartline?"

As he waited, breathless, for the answer, Gail saw a fleeting look of tenderness and understanding suffuse Mac's ruddy features.

"Hartline, of the rustlers that shot up Charles Lamar over on the Atna?" he asked with a note of reverence. "John Hartline's wife?"

"The sister." Gail felt his face flood scarlet, but he maintained his stare.

"Hartline was fighting for this country, for you an' me, boy," declared Mac awesomely; and swallowing once, he looked away, as though yielding to a sudden shyness. "To be honest, I saw no one o' that name," he went on, incisively. "But if she's your girl, and you expect her in the deestrick, from what I've heard o' the blood in her kin, and o' you, in the hour I'm back in town, you ain't to be disappointed. . . . Now I'm oot fer a while, rustling steak and coffee," and he vanished down the stairway.

A delicious giddiness swept Gail. Gold in his grasp — Clara on the Yanaga! A hot band pressed upon his temples. His heart throbbed wildly. Never had he faced such glory, not even in the instant when his gun had felled Lamar in proving the teachings of Bob Snowden and the North. . . . Gods! His ache for perpetuity, his gospel of charity and violence, of sympathy and hardness, pivoted upon gold and Clara. His surging thoughts drew them each into a single focus. No shadow of Lena, or sense of guilt that he could

yet be bound to her, now broke in to blight or darken his brave and perfect certainties. He was beginning life anew, in all the wisdom which this land had bared to him, in behalf of the multitudes bound to the Youngest World, of their unswerving, creative patience, their formless thirst for immortality. He would become their Moses; the North had chosen him. It could not withhold his final guerdon. Clara would give him a young breathing body, formed of their own blood and tissue. She must . . . must . . . must!

For hours, glaring into the filmy dimness of the loft, at the blankets, harnesses, bales, saddles, in their very familiarness unreal, Gail lay inert with wide-parted lips, striving to subdue these cosmic, palpitating fantasies. He found that he had switched off the grimy lamp, cast himself on the red blankets. He felt that he could never sleep again, till at his goal. Once strident snores conveyed that Macdonald had returned, during a lapse of consciousness (Gail told himself) from his very self-intoxication. Without routing him from the cot, the Scotsman had kindly turned into his sleeping bag on the floor.

From outside the prolonged, hideous howl of wolf-dogs, the shouts of a drunkard seeking his bunk-house, entered the ghostly snow-light. A golden pallor suffused the one frosted window. Gail got up, dressed quickly in the buckskins of his killing, his wanderings and Hoherda, shouldered his dunnage, and slipped out past the sleeping Mac, down into the street.

The snow of the surrounding hills seemed to lift slant shafts of rosy light, to cry defiance at the earth's muffled immobility. At one corner, as Gail hurried to the Savoy, he heard the drip from eaves, and though spring

was still a month away, he believed that he felt in his nostrils a faint and balmy aroma.

VIII

The stout and pock-marked Joe Overheiser stood in a knot of men elaborately dressed for the trail in flat astrakan caps and embroidered moccasins. Gail recognised them as the "operators" of a Tacoma quartz syndicate, whom he had heard were pulling out that morning. Len's dog-team was ready, the sled piled high, and his partner's sable *parka* crowning its tarpaulins; the dogs — big black Tanana malemutes with stumpy tails and white "shirt-fronts" — dozing prone in the snow.

Down the street, he saw Len approaching. He was walking unsteadily, his head down, staring at the board-walk.

"If he c'd see through the snow," said Joe, "I'd call him mighty int'rested in the wood-ticks laying in them planks."

"She got me full all right," announced Borden, drunkenly, to them, lifting red and watery eyes in greeting. "Sydney's going — to start up a house. . . . Hell of a good-bye."

"You didn't let on how we were pulling out?" demanded Gail.

"It was likely Sig who told her," said Joe dryly.

"Nop. She wheedled it out of me," stammered Len, inspecting his outfit. "Never was any good with women, nor understood 'em. They always play me. But I can drive dogs. You a'ready, Mr. Gabriel Thain? . . . Gee! Haw!" He reached for his raw-hide whip; but stumbling, turned quickly upon the

crowd that was collecting, and shouted, "Yah! I'm bound for the devil — th' Yanaga!"

Gail's jaw dropped; his whole frame was shaking. "You ain't going back on me?" his tense voice spoke out before the silent onlookers.

"I — you —" Len's bleary sight strove to take in Gail, his mind to clear itself. "No, pardner, you bet I ain't," he said thickly. "And if I do? Remember the team's yours — keep it — with blessings — yours — hike there b' yourself — come back millionaire. . . . Sydney won't stand for my quitting her."

Joe nudged Gail and nodded confirmingly. "Take it." "We're witnesses." "Gettin' out of yer partnership cheap." Voices arose in the throng, which so well knew Len.

It sent up a half cheer, half shout. All had turned, and were looking up the street. Gail's heart stopped at the sight there. Sydney, in her squirrel coat, under her waving white ostrich plumes. She was striding angrily past the Tanana drug-store. Len staggered, and reached for Gail's shoulder. She was close upon them, her hard features drawn and set, small blue eyes contracted but with no doll-like innocence, in their cruellest wantonness. The crowd parted, closed her in, then fell back. Her gaze fixed on Gail, seemed to flinch, as she struggled vainly for words, colouring above her rouge, maybe in shame. Then, facing Borden, now quivering and collapsed, she burst into shrill vituperation.

"You. . . . You dirty welcher! . . ."

She seized the dog-whip from the sledge, raising her arm cracked it once in the air, and fell to her job.

The company stood rooted, in a deadly stillness. It

seemed recognised that it was not for them to interfere; that, by some ages-dead treaty of the warring sexes, the woman should fulfil such a prerogative as valiantly as the man must take his medicine.

He was drunk and she cold sober. That was part of the loathsomeness. The dogs stirred in the snow, rose and stretched their dark bodies; cast somnolent, questioning eyes upon the brutal humans, and began to whine as if in protest.

His hat fell off, showing his pale, curly hair, rumpled youthfully. Her mussed bang ejected the big, woolly sausage of a "rat." But no one guffawed.

"Give it to him!" yelled a voice. "Go to it, Lulu!"

The sharp, elastic, explosive lashing upon Len's khaki trousers, his face, his hands, continued, as she whipped and whipped.

She led him down the street by the collar, the crowd following, still silent.

Once Borden turned, and shouted back — "Take the outfit. . . . I ain't a-going. . . ."

Gail and Overheiser stood alone.

"He knew he wasn't," said Joe. "He never meant to."

Gail pulled himself together, ripped out an oath that seemed to tear him open, and, jumping on the sled, urged the willing dogs off toward the trail.

CHAPTER XVI

BREAK-UP AND BEGINNING

I

HE stood ankle-deep, alone, in the melting snow. The open tarpaulin of his camp was guyed to a big spruce, against which leaned his snow-shoes, their gut thongs mushy and rotten. He had worn them for the last time. The dark space melted by his camp-fire had been mysteriously enlarging, under the burning May sun that now rose at three o'clock to shame the embers into skeleton ash. Their subtle aroma of poplar filled the air; but incense hung all about. The swelling cottonwood buds were censers of the balm-o'-Gilead; the black, leafy soil, the reluctant snow, raised a misty, penetrating exhalation, a spirituous assurance of the world's new birth and the restless wheel of time.

Spring! Earth stifled with the spring. Yonder on the river bank the pale, smooth-trunked aspens were tenderly a-glitter with young-greenness, even though drifts yet banked them. In their tops ravens — shiny, blue-black specks — lurched and made a gulping mutter, on the vain watch for the first run of salmon. From somewhere came the sonorous honks of unseen geese. Overhead, V after V of ducks, a mighty procession, plodded northward, each flock like a pair of huge shears ripping through the milk-blue sky. Close to hovered a cloud of insects, as if the snow had spawned them. A mosquito sang in Gail's ear. He slapped it; and began to load his back-pack for the endless, lonely march.

To think!— a week back the world lay inert and muffled, in that mute and brittle cold which denied the very thought of warmth and sap and life. Now, as if touched by the magic of a single hour, the North raised this hallelujah of them! Upstream, behind the white saw-edges of the foot-hills, sprang the distant, dazing alps, emanations distorted in a crinkling sun-blaze. There the river, widening into a network of countless threads, raucous and coffee-brown, drew from the crumbling ice and gravel cliffs, the five-mile-wide face of its aweing glacier. But the spell of winter was unbroken below this island in the Tsana River where Gail was camped. Its channels gathered around him into one great trunk, plunged between the dark walls of a sudden canyon, under the dumb ice of November. And thence, all the way to the coast at Cook Inlet, to Beluga on its lower shores, the Tsana was adamantine — to remain so until the “break-up.”

This now was at hand: when all the frozen arteries of Alaska would in one instant slough off their pallid skin; that second, final miracle of spring, craved and dreaded the land over; when the dark, nether shadows of the canyons warm and loose the grip of basalt fingers: the time of tumbling ice-cakes and avalanches, in the tumultuous pean of a world regenerated beneath the streams of summer. Any moment might usher it.

Thus Gail paused, when he had wrapped his pots and the lean bags of beans and flour in his bedding and tarpaulin, folded the last sliver of bacon into its big flap of rind. A fortnight ago he had quitted the stampeders on the Yanaga, and headed south into the trailless unknown. It was still a hundred miles to the coast. Unless the river broke so that he could raft, his grub would not last. But grub could never matter if this

happened while he was in the canyon. He must avoid it.

He slung on his pack, and in bare moccasins headed toward the east shore, across the soggy ice below the island. In a half hour his exhausting day had begun, breaking trail with soaked and freezing feet, through the slush of the chaotic "draws" and gullies in the upper valley floor.

II

Since the day that Gail had left Chickaman six weeks back, he felt that both the land and humankind had played him false. Among the horde that swelled the trail into the gaunt hills about the sources of the Yanaga, he had not found his eldorado, nor any trace of Clara. And yet this morning he was curiously light-hearted, intoxicated by the spring.

But the panorama of the stampede clung oppressively to his mind. Often in lonely cabins he had heard the details of such a rush rehearsed, ever with emphasis upon the humour of its futility, the grotesqueness of its tragedies, so hackneyed in the experience of all pioneers. But always reluctantly they would review its serious aspects, its efficacy in attaining their rich dream. Not in the welter of a stampede did the argonauts of Gail's lone pilgrimage imagine finding their pay-streak. That should be delved by each alone, in some undiscovered valley, seeing the scintillant glitter in the black sand of his gold-pan, driving his "discovery" stake.

He looked back upon the long, snake-like horde of dog-teams, angora goat-teams, horse-sleds, hand-sleds; to the jealous, set-eyed concentration of angular youths and bearded old men who toiled with their all upon their backs. There were clerks, gamblers, yellow-legs, law-

yers, dudes, drummers, English lords; of womankind, their "partners," squaws, and the like of Gumboot Sal, who peddled fusel oil from the rear of her travoy loaded with a piano swathed in red blankets. It was a thread of strident vitality, vibrating across the dazzling vast. That mask of the dives and streets of Chickaman, worn by riff-raff and "sour-dough" alike there, was torn off; but to be replaced by the more distorted passions of naked ego galling ego, competing against death for gold. They drew all into a yet closer likeness. Engrossed with outfitting in the big camp, transported by Aladdin visions, men had been blind to the trail's despairs. As a swarm of "mushers," they found life to be that sardonic changeling of reality that corrupts the clean struggle for all great visions. For Gail it desecrated the virgin wild, that arena where his thirsts should be fulfilled. It weakened his faith in the lure of gold as a measure of the North's manhood and its deserved survival.

He travelled alone with Len's dog-team, yet slept and mixed his bread with the Bricker brothers. Three olive-skinned, hang-jawed youths from Sacramento, they had an inspired faith in hydraulic propositions, and behind ten burros were freighting in some dozen tons of 12-inch piping, the value of which per pound, as reckoned by the ever-mounting price of sugar, they would re-estimate at each halt, wiping the sweat from their foreheads. In their tent also gathered Mrs. Weymouth, and a grey little pop-eyed man of sixty, who had sold hailstone insurance in Missouri, and was packing in an electric prospecting apparatus behind a team of three goats and a Shetland pony. The first was known as a missionary at her home in Buffalo, where she lectured on the starving aborigines of Alaska, and

collected clothing for them. In the North she was called the "oil-queen," from her many seepage claims in the Iliamna country. She ran a general store there, but none of her garments had ever been seen warming a Siwash gratis. Still, as a rustler this bony woman with her duplicate chin commanded a respect and tolerance, often summed in the phrase that she "druv her own dog-team." And she took Dring, the insurance man, aboard her sled when he came down with liver pains in his third week out, and buried him in her best newmarket coat on the day that they emerged upon the bluff above the Yanaga.

By then the cold, snow-blindness from the blazing spring sun, all the excruciating toil of the march had undermined the ambitions of most men. Hopes tottered, plunging them to depths of gloom and anathema. Tales of fabulous values "to the pan," "even on the benches," reversed to grim certainties that bedrock was too deep, of "spotted" pay-streaks, and ground salted by fiends that deserved ham-stringing. The anarchy of the exodus from Chickaman ordered itself into the inevitable oligarchy of all stampedes. The weak became camp-followers to the strong. Many let out their teams, back-packed for a dollar a day and grub, to serve them whose dreams, or pockets, or vanity, were toughest. And the smartest women prevailed upon their mates to hew spruce and set up road-houses.

The swarm flooded upon the hundred creeks of the Yanaga head-waters, like a dammed stream; but only to find all the good ground staked by its handful of "square-head" locators. Clannish and scornful, these Swedes gave a churlish welcome. A few men broke into hysterical laughter. A piano-drummer from Grand Rapids shot himself. The more stubborn clung to their

fool's paradise, maybe because it was such, but swearing under their breath how, "you'd have to hawg-tie" them to go on another rush. Yet everywhere their square-hewn claim stakes bloomed forth blindly, on the concealing snow, even on the glacier ice that fed the river. Big tents arose for gambling and bars that peddled rot-gut whisky. Outfits were auctioned for a song, and the price of flour fell from a hundred to ten dollars a sack. Before a pit had been sunk, recorders were elected and registration fees fixed at miners' meetings, which now a moustached and corduroyed faro dealer, now a bulldog young Scotsman from Halifax, controlled by bluff and the power of his lungs, until some ribald jest, or vile charge, or a flash of the frontier's cynic respect for woman, broke the feverish tension into fist- or gun-work.

Gail surrendered his hope of finding Clara. However he searched the faces of the few outfits that came over the glaciers from the south, questioned them with descriptions of her, he found no trace. Men looked askance at his beseeching. Walking alone at night in the snowy streets of the temporary, tented settlements, when the orbs of candles bloomed against the white walls and voices lapsed into earnest talk broken by long pauses, Gail touched his nadir of despair. And his life as an argonaut was a burlesque of that half-divine and dauntless pursuit of gold which he had grasped on his long wandering. It was making the sympathy that overlaid his native hardness callous with sophistication. This was swinging him back to that same intolerance in which a year ago ignorance had held him. He began to doubt the worthiness of any multitude as a source of wisdom, or as a creditor for his physical survival; his old misgiving of the impotence of men in

masses, fronting their dreams, revived. His escape from Chickaman had only plunged him deeper into the hectic, artificial slough — recalling Hoherda and the *Seward* — which he had yearned to escape. To be himself again he must stand alone and free in the naked wilderness. . . .

Then came the foreordained scurvy. It deepened into tragic notes the unrestful chorus of the camps; yet turned Gail's dejection into activity. First an old dentist named Hall succumbed, then a young Dane with a broken nose. Drug outfits were displayed; men assembled in knots to swap episodes of the scourge in other rushes, describe its torpor, the blackening of legs, the swollen gums; some cowered as if it were the plague, many jested, or blatantly prescribed citric acid and spruce-needle tea as sure cures. Voices grew more garrulous, but softer, behind the tents at night; life in the improvised dives burned over-brightly, yet among fewer patrons. Gold was a bitter hoax, and already pans, rockers, picks, were rusting in the snow, which had begun to melt slightly at each noon.

Near the 1st of May, Gail sold his dog-team to the Brickers for six hundred dollars, and forsook this ferment of shattered yearnings and ironic faiths. He started over the Yanaga glacier, packing on his back, early one morning when the first dark streaks glistened on the cliffs of the gulches. Until near midnight the snow seemed to absorb, instead of to give forth, the palor of the day. Scaling and glissading across moraines, threading crevasses, he felt that he had resumed the exalting, heroic hours of his struggle up Mt. Lincoln, and he was refilled with the indelible splendour of their inspirations.

Thus he travelled south across the divide into the

Tsana country bordering upon Cook Inlet. That spur of joy in subduing Nature against her challenges possessed him once more, effacing the spell of gold. He was a fool to have believed a newspaper rumour, even *her* vow. Trueblood had been right about the life-sapping power of the sex. . . . He would mate with some woman — a squaw, if need be — in a salmon village on the coast.

III

By noon today Gail had reached the heart of the great schist barrier that blocked the Tsana to form its canyon. On the steep slopes, snowbanks gave firm footholds, here shrinking from the pale, leathery leaves of anemones, there arched and broken by the fungus-like growth of coarse lupine embryos. The drifts melted with an audible "spick, spick," buds of the willows were fuzzy, their red stems shining as if oiled, and the trim spindles of the spruces dusty and weatherworn by contrast. He took off his mackinaw and tied it around his waist. Steam kept collecting on his black glasses, dimming the windless May sunshine. He felt languorous, tempted to cast himself, thoughtless and ruminating, into the delicious coolness of the snow. Life was no longer a charge of pride to be battled for; awakened Nature would care for him, and he need feel no responsibility. He was no more an atom in her grim negotiations, but the idol, rather, of her dawning luxuriance. The silences had lost their foreboding, to hold only that suspense by which the glorifying climax of an orchestra is prepared. It was good simply to be alive, without woman or gold, in the blessedness of his enduring flesh.

Narrow box canyons cut down toward the river, and Gail had continually to choose between circling their

head-walls and plunging straight across them. Suddenly a splash and gurgle touched his ears. He listened. Free and falling water! The wall of a broad, deep gorge cut the snow — a black ruff of slate. He peered over it, to gaze upon the white thread of a torrent crawling from a haze of spray. Descending thither by crevices in the rock, its unpent sound and motion dazed him somewhat; and at the bottom, with not an inch of drifts visible, the narrow strip of sky was like midsummer.

He followed the stream riverward, jumping from boulder to boulder. Perhaps he was at last below the canyon. But soon another roar reached his ears, the deep reverberation, as if from the earth's bowels, of rapids in the distant Tsana. An icy air-current met him. So, as the far wall was now unscalable, he would have to retrace his steps. But Gail was in no hurry; besides, he was hungry. Blocks of lignite were scattered in the creek-bed. He threw down his pack, collected drift-wood and started a fire. Next, going to the torrent, he dug out a chunk of the wood-coal from the dry sand edging the water, and broke it upon the flames. He laid out flour, salt, bacon grease in an empty milk can for flap-jacks, filled his teapot from the stream, placing it on the fire. Then he leaned back to doze, on a tussock of matted red-top grass, under an aspen from which sap was drooling, in the tarry smoke.

It was this lapse, impelled by the sorcery of the spring, which fixed Gail's destiny. For the season had uncovered the lignite, of whose heat he was ignorant, never having used it before. And for months, always forced to stuff his kettle with snow, and wait interminably for it to melt and boil, he had forgotten the vola-

tility of water . . . Heretofore, every event in Gail's life had seemed the deliberate, resultant logic of his actions; this was no less so in the crisis which his closed eyes now faced; yet impelling it, arbitrary Nature, having overpowered him, played the decisive part. It was the spring that tipped the balance of his fate, which henceforward he felt never lay wholly in his own hands.

He slept on.

Of a sudden, hissing and a spurt of steam awoke him. The teapot had boiled over. Gail sprang up, seized it, scalded his hands, dropped the thing nozzle-down over the red-hot coals. The quenched, sizzling fire cast up a blinding cloud. For a moment he stood there swearing; then, looking out toward the channel for dry fuel, he started toward a small drift-pile nearby. Beside it, a great nob of the half-carbonised wood was deeply bedded in the gravel, and when he had collected enough sticks, he set to digging out the smooth black block with his hands. It refused to budge. Gail went back for his axe, and set to work again.

The flash met his eyes from the bottom of the pit, when finally he had heaved up the lignite. It was faint, no more than a shimmering speck against the black sand, in its pale fragment of quartz under a film of water. But to Gail's dancing sight, it might have been the focus of a dozen suns. He started backward, an arm drawn before his forehead. His heart had become a trip-hammer. Open-mouthed, to steady his bewilderment, his gaze clutched upon the sheer walls of the gully, and their sable striated rocks appeared to pitch and swim. He lurched over the hole once more. Gold! The stony nugget seemed to enlarge, like a magnified image shot upon the screen of a magic lantern. He fell

on his knees, thrust his hands under the muck that cased it. It filled the horny skin of both his fists.

Gold! He had found it. The Grail of the Youngest World — the altar of its inheritors, the God of their avowals, the guerdon of all suffering and heroism and tragedy. The blood of his fathers in far lands long ago had furtively, inexorably, continued itself, generation after generation, that he, Gabriel Thain, should be embodied to stoop here, trembling, in this paling sunlight and finger the reward. Ice-cap and earthquake, flood and desert, Arctic blast and the siroccos of those tropic aeons when mammoths roamed the North, had each goaded the tumult of creation, only to plant this yellow fragment here for him to find. The music of spring, of all Time, had swelled into its crisis.

Gail's brain seemed to boil, yet a shiver crept through the roots of his hair, and the relentless, metallic voices of the tributary dimmed upon his ears. He held the key of existence. The earth was in his power. The deathlessness of his flesh was attained, warm and masterful throughout the ages. Woman — its vehicle — was but a detail, now that he could provide. His tongue was parched, his throat dry, but he burst into a self-scorning, disillusioned laughter. His desolating failures on the Yanaga became an evil memory, a nightmare. They had bid to efface all the wisdom and vigour with which the North and its avatars had gifted him. They had falsely soured his faith in the multitude as worthy of sympathy, self-sacrifice, and hope for the North. But now he swung back into the aggressive, adjunctive spirit of his victory over Lamar — Lamar, for whom his possession of this gold even extended a fellowship and Bob's charity. A storm of thought swept him, which mingled them all, along with

Tom and Hartline, the boy Arthur — might he not succour and save him? — yet in which the image of Clara floated obscure and tantalising. . . . But he was a different man now, in another world. The idea sobered him. The cliffs cast back his revelry with a peculiar hollowness, quelling his exultation; and staring at the nugget, his innate scepticism and doubt of self steadied his reason.

The gold lay bedded in the vague shape of a cross, no more than a tiny inlay, splashed on the white, pear-shaped mass of rock. But why were its edges so rough? Placer gold should be smooth. A horrid misgiving struck him. Had he been duped — was this a “plant” — salted? His anxious eyes wandered again along the cliffs. About a rod upstream they fixed upon a yellowish, upright strata, where the schist of the main valley-barrier upthrust into the slate of the gulch. Pale against its blackness, the layered, crumbling and ancient look of this rock filled Gail with a curious thrill. Fool that he had been! His treasure was a piece of “float,” and it had come from *there*. So steep a channel as this never carried placer. He marked a clump of spruces yonder, seized the axe, and leaping across the stream, soon was digging his feet, clawing with excited fingers, upward through the soft granite.

He found himself blinking before a slant gash in the rusted, rotted quartz. But the sight that took his breath away, that clouded his memory until, an hour later, he found himself back at the coal fire under the aspen, lay between this and a shriveled boss of greenish rock that edged the slate. It was there that he had beheld the star-like glitter, faint in the afternoon light, yet so necromantically conjured, of gold “in place,”

the free-milling lode which is the North's dream of Alnaschar.

Now he could not recall having made tea or eaten pancakes, although he felt no hunger. He was strapping the frying-pan into his pack, and with it four other dazzling fragments. The whitish dots of claim-stakes — square-faced, their distances apart paced out, and bearing the pencilled formula for "recording" which he had learned in his long vagabondage — showed below the spruces and on the gaunt heights against the sky. He strove to grasp the scope of the task before him to realise their promise. He must promote his discovery, get "outside" capital, and he knew from hearsay that discouraging ordeal against incredulity and avarice. But he burned with faith in himself and his find; a vision of stampedes hither thrilled him, as the leader in unsealing this rich realm to the elect of the North's pioneers.

It was beginning to freeze, and there was no level here for camp. But to go back over the head of the gulch? 'Never! Canyon or not, rapids or no, even the break-up, he dared them all in his fever to reach the coast and human beings. He lifted his pack, and started on the run into the lowering gloom in the direction of the Tsana.

The creek bent to the left. He forded it often, staggering among the moving boulders, wet and numb to his waist. The gorge widened, plunged and opened theatrically into the snowy glimmer of an immense amphitheatre. A thunder of waters assaulted him. He came out upon a cleft mid-high in the wall of the main canyon, down which his torrent cataracted into a shroud of ice. He was gazing upon the whole width of the Tsana, a hanging, balanced avalanche of

disintegrating floes, which quaked and shuddered with an unearthly rumbling. The sharp wind drawing upstream cut him. Just below, the canyon walls ended abruptly, and the river bent around a gourd-shaped pinnacle. But there, beyond the gloom, under the glow of a bright sky that would persist till midnight, appeared a great valley of white boulders, of silty flats intersected by many channels into islands bristling with great cottonwoods and checkered by snow-drifts. And edging thither along the crevice, as his being thrilled to this new world, he seemed to discern a bluish haze, and an odour touched his nostrils which made them dilate, and stopped him short, clutching the snow-bent alders.

The cap of this day of enchantments! Woodsmoke! He smelt the unmistakable, sweet tang of burning poplar-wood. Men were on the trail of his eldorado! The cleft pitched downward, and he slid reckless, breathless, jealously feeling at the nuggets in his pack, a hand stealing to the holster of his gun. Level with the river at last, he stealthily rounded the bulbous pillar of rock, into a sandy flat, seeing for the first time the whole shore on which he was. A blue whirl of smoke, caught by the wind, flung itself toward him out of a little hardwood grove back from the river by a rocky mound. With a fearsome heart, he dropped behind a boulder. He must approach these beings to gain a first advantage, stalk them like an animal his prey.

Thus he crept forward, dodging from boulder to boulder, the spell of spring obliterated from his mind, his hand on his revolver and an acrid taste in the mouth, until he was less than a hundred yards from the fire by the grove. There he crouched, braced his caloused hands against the cloaking stone, and leaned

forward his body lithely from the waist. All around the vacant fire the snow had faded, and there were scattered weathered wood-chips, fragments of boxes, sacking, tin-cans, on a hard and trodden soil — the unmistakable signs of a long-used, permanent camp. And then his breath failed as he saw the being which issued from the grove.

A human figure, but a woman's figure. She carried a big wash-tub before her in both hands, laboriously, leaning backward as she walked to the embers, and placed it upon them. Gail's first clear sensation was of ineffable relief. All his tendons relaxed, his hand fell from the holster. But as he watched, drinking in her aspect, and she, leaning over the tub, squeezed and rubbed the grimy garments, a giddy warmth, a remote sense that was unseating, probing into his whole life, suffused and constricted his vitals. At first it was but her slender womanliness that dazed him, the white sweater, the frayed blue denim skirt, the snow-bleached dark hair undulating upon her shoulders, as if she had just washed it also, to dry in the day's burst of heat. The past! He could not see her face. She kept turning it over one shoulder, peering down stream at the river, as if expectant of some approaching presence there; and then, as one listens for a haunting sound, she would veer and sweep her eyes along the face of the crumbling rock behind her.

With a wild impulse to break the ominous suspense that was closing upon his soul, Gail rasped out a cough. The woman lurched back from her tub, transfixed, staring toward him. That lithe, free movement, as of an out-door denizen! A hand shaded her brow, but it failed to hide the bold forehead, straight mouth, the eyes . . . the eyes . . . Time contracted to a fusing-

point. A black, wingless insect struggling across the snow-bank at Gail's feet engrossed him for an instant. Then all his life in the North, his new-discovered world of riches, was inverted into the fires within him. He stepped forward, reeling, and ran dizzily toward the fire.

He called her name over and over — yet again.

IV

Entrenched behind her tub, Clara held him off with a dripping hand, its fingers spread and taut. She had lowered her face; its smooth olive skin was the hue of the snow, her trembling lips dark as the hollows in the river ice.

"You — you're a myth —" he breathed. "If I hadn't —"

His high cheek-bones scarlet, Gail tried to rout the silly reflection that had thrust itself between him and his gladness: how, had not the spring uncovered his gold, he would have hit back up the gulch and emerged far below her camp.

"It's ordained, Clara. Let me — let me look at you."

"Oh — look."

She echoed him monotonously. In his fervour, the dulness of her once resonant voice at first escaped Gail. And he missed its note of derangement, as, raising her head, she added grimly, "I'll show you things. . . ."

"Alone here? Alive still!" he pleaded, exulted, beholding the rubbish that littered the sand, staring about for tent or cabin.

Motionless, Clara appeared to be struggling against

the moist, vacant glaze that suffused her tawny eyes as they pinioned him.

"I always do pull through," she mumbled, "through everything. That's the awful part." Her rigidity relaxed, and she swallowed once. "But, Gabriel — in the cave there. All winter . . . I've been mad." She cast a cowering glance toward the face of rock, choking out her words, with breast heaving, body collapsing.

Gail seized and supported her by the shoulders. As she hung upon him, he still strove to realise her presence — warm, pulsating, after what privations of cold and fatigue! Ever the same, dominant and rugged in her vitalising, elusive beauty; with her restrained inertia; the wide, quivering nostrils, the dark lashes, the brooding and somnolent flames between them. Strange that she had survived? It was as inevitable as the spring's triumph! How thin she was, pathetically sharp her chin! The quizzical line between her long brows had deepened. Yet her hollow features bore a healthful, weathered hue, and her lips were firm now and red, whatever the horror of dark and endless months.

For a moment the muffled clamour of the ice-bound river filled Gail's ears as if in celebration. Always Clara drew power from the North. His hand lingered in the strands of her burnished hair, now inclined to curl; upon the strong cords of her open neck; through her white jersey he felt the hard shell of sinew that cased her slim fragility. Overcome, he was folding her in his embrace, when her warning of aberration confused his mounting ecstasy.

"Mad?" Gail panted. "What cave?"

She did not answer. Revived, she slid sinuously from

his arms, and facing the cliff, funneled her hands before her mouth.

"Laundy! Laundy!" she called.

"Who's he?" began Gail, gently. But at once a blackness swept his heart.

"My partner," she replied, without turning, and the drear monotony again entered her voice. "Old Adam Laundy. Eight months with his visions. You'd ought to hear him sometimes. He's very bad."

"Old?" repeated Gail, trying to allay his jealousy. And he grasped again her torture in such a lonely winter as the hardest sour-doughs seldom pass with sanity. Images of Clara, numb and starving, thrilled him with homage. What other woman could have endured such desperation, and then this meeting, without a whimper or a tear!

"Yes, come. I'll show him to you," she said, but with a shudder. "You got to save us. I know my mind's unhinged, but you're clearing it, a'ready. You knew I was here?"

She plucked him by an arm, and as they quickly left the washtub, skirting the grove toward the slant rocks, he told briefly about the newspaper in Hoherda — Chickaman — the harrowing search on the Yanaga.

"Laundy had a trading-store at Beluga," she once uttered dully, as her mind reverted, infuriating Gail. "We hit straight north from Cook Inlet. He collapsed just at the freeze-up, poor fanatic!"

They had reached the cliff. At its far end, a flat-tish arch some four feet wide and high, over sand pounded and ridged with the long going and coming of feet, framed a space of darkness. In a moment Gail was within it, groping blindly after Clara, his feet pressing the softness of dried grass, and in his nostrils the

sour smell of decaying stone, mouldy flour, rancid grease and dunnage.

"Adam! Adam!" she called, stopping to fumble for a light.

"Adam, you call him that?" broke out Gail accusingly, unable to curb himself longer. "What's he to you?"

"What isn't he!" she retorted with a challenge that abashed him. "A partner—in this country." Yet her vehemence was not shameless.

The blue sputter of a miner's match widened into light from her hand. The cave walls, which Gail had conceived as pressing upon their heads, sprang magically into a dome of lofty galleries, and dim moss-like stalactites. Stooping over, Clara lit two candles on a block of wood by some blankets—her bed, Gail judged, from its neatness and the pair of beaded moc-casins stuck with a needle and thread lying there. The twin weak flames illuminated blackened pots, soiled tarpaulins, scattered about, which yet cast a flavour of homeliness into the damp and hollow vaults above.

"Look at his legs. The stains on them. Tell me if it's that curse, the scurvy," Clara whispered, pointing into a recess of the cave. "He sleeps 'most all day."

Gail heard a groan. He discerned in a jumble of blankets (far from hers, he noted eagerly) the moving glitter of two eyes. A head raised itself near the heap of boxes and limp sacks. Its aspect immediately filled Gail with relief. He saw the face of an aged man; long, snowy, matted hair that fell in tattered ends into an unkempt and rusty beard; features clean-cut as a cameo; a square angular jaw and a curved, beaky nose on which the skin, marred by pinkish

blotches, was drawn tight and shining. In that gloom he suggested uncanny countenances, such as Gail had seen pictured from catacombs, except for his blue eyes — bulging “pearl” eyes, watery and burning, which did not blink. It was a dumbly scrutinising face, curiously unlined, through which struggled an afterglow of youth and hope.

“Plenty of men wanted to come with John Hartline’s sister,” muttered Clara. “But I wouldn’t take any younger, because of Gabriel. . . . Adam had a ‘hunch’ for prospecting for mica — there’s money in isinglass for stoves and electric insulators — till gold fever hit him. He’s had his fire in life — has it still — only he’s too old.”

“Clara, forgive me,” stammered Gail, humiliated, his misdoubts quite dead.

“I’d have been slurred, taking any other,” she wandered. “And no matter, without you love a man. I did, so stood the risk of Adam.”

“Clara!” Her dogged, heedless loyalty overwhelmed Gail.

Then a fit of coughing seized Adam Laundry. He swayed to and fro, babbling a weak sing-song. The bear-gut *kamaleika* that clothed his wasted trunk and was dotted with red tufts of worsted, crackled loudly as he sat up in the blankets. Gail stooped, drawing them down across his legs, for the stain of scurvy shows plainest there. He yielded nervelessly, murmuring in a thin voice:

“Isin’glass — isin’glass. Nature’s winders, that a man ken see any soul through. There’s a chase in life! Who is he, Clary?”

Gail started. The vague, incisive words caught him unawares, stirred his dormant introspection. But he

only pulled back the grimy drawers over Laundry's skeleton limbs, and arose with a solemn nod.

"The coffee-colouring. I knew it was," she said, accepting his confirmation without a tremour.

"Fresh stuff, potatoes." Gail named the only undisputed specifics for scurvy from his experience on the Yanaga. "Nothing else'll save him, and I guess there's none of either short of the coast."

"The Inlet?" she asked avidly, and her voice, growing more normal with the idea, except that it mirrored no pain in her memories, continued, "But we haven't over twenty pounds of rice and apricots, beside the bacon. And dried fruit's no good, either. It's been a race with starving since March. . . . I bet you've got no more grub than that."

Gail caught a breath. His own dilemma in food, obscured by all the palpitant drama of the day, assailed him keenly. "No," he admitted, crestfallen. "The coast's his one hope. Have you any boat?"

"How else do you think we got here? It's hauled ashore two miles down the river"—ever she spoke more acutely—"where the Siwashes quit helping us to cordel."

"Then it's no good till the break-up. He's too far gone to hit any trail. I'd say he couldn't live a week."

"Oh, oh!" she gasped, poignantly for the first time.

"Show him our peaches, Clary," interrupted the old man, with a shrill abruptness, reaching a hand into one of the sacks at his head. "See—clean as a whistle. Cost ye four bits a pound at Beluga. Sell ye here for six. Thrown away. A bargain." He waved his withered fingers in the air and blew upon the imaginary sample between them. "An' three hundred pounds of

rice. Not the dog stuff. Rice goes farthest if y'are jackassing." The wheezing cough caught him again, showing his black and swollen gums. All at once something flew out of them, upon the blankets. Gail peered at a corroded tooth.

"That's about the last he has left," avowed Clara, nervelessly.

An aching silence. Finally —

"Hark!" exclaimed Gail. "Listen!"

Both stiffened upright, turning toward the entrance of the cave. There, borne in upon the late, pale light that since their eyes had grown used to the darkness had subdued the candles, penetrated a grinding, muffled thunder, a distant reverberation like the clamour of surf.

"It's come. I knew it," declared Clara, blazing-eyed.

"Yes," echoed Gail, diving out under the rocky arch. "The break-up!"

"Adam's saved then!" acclaimed Clara, joining him outside. They strained their eyes outward into the gloaming, but beheld only the smooth icy courses of the Tsana, threading the silent islands, as immobile as in mid-winter.

"The ice ought to go out all together, in a gorge," Gail asserted at last, perplexed. "Not to is against nature, unheard-of. There's a false start miles below here. She's dropped off, leaving the floes solid and hanging up to the canyon."

But the chagrin that had replaced the wonder upon his face failed to curb Clara's joy.

"Look!" She pointed to a smaller channel nearer shore, which in their heat to scan the main river had escaped them. It showed a glossy, greyish ribbon of

water moving slowly through the dusk, boiling out from under a ragged lip of ice.

"We heard more than the ice breaking there," reasoned Gail.

"Launch the boat in that tomorrow for the Inlet," ejaculated Clara. "Pack Adam on our backs to where she's beached. We'll pull him through."

Gail recoiled. "Not before the whole river goes. It 'u'd be suicide. We'd be caught any minute, crushed and drowned."

He checked himself, before the sudden, set pallor of her features — resolute, domineering, as of old.

"Adam and I start tomorrow, anyhow," she faced him boldly.

"It's sure death," he rejoined, though knowing himself helpless to combat her will. "What's Laundry beside us, our love and the future?"

"Where's the sympathy we boasted of in Attalota's cabin," her voice shook, "for the men the land belongs to? Adam's one of them, only he's played out now. Is that any call to let him die?"

A woman's sentiment! Yet Gail winced. At last he had fathomed the pluck and loyalty that swayed her for the crazed old man. And it gripped him that though her mind had been rambling, now the chance of saving him had shocked it into the sanest resourceful clarity.

Then, in the reproachful pause, thought of the charity that Bob had decreed swept Gail. But he voiced its contradiction, which instantly hardened him,

"But this dying old man, Clara. Doesn't he block our winning in the North, like Lamar, if we risk the river?"

"Has the winter trail made a brute of you?" she

retorted, hotly. "The camps got you afraid and soft in the months we've been apart? You want to lose me — and everything?"

Dick Trueblood's prophetic fear for him!

"You want Adam to die here, obscene and raving?" she cried, wildly confronting him, in horror at that long-dreaded scene. "I told you he was my partner, in this hideous country. . . . Adam, oh, Adam! — after what you and I've been through! . . . Shame, Gail!"

She broke off, and flinging herself about, ran back into the cave.

It seemed to Gail, gazing after her, and beside himself in a blind despair, that her shoulders had heaved with a deep convulsive sob.

v

Gail staggered to the dying fire. It was late, near midnight. In the melting warmth, the river was spawning shreds of ghost-mist that entangled the island forests. Still wan with daylight, the arching sky was like mother-o'-pearl, where a few faint stars trembled liquidly.

Humiliated, bewildered, a sense of guilt stole through Gail's distraction, then self-reproach and remorse. His mind, more than hers, had been askew for weeks; even today. Else, in the memory of those brief, passionate avowals in the Torlina cabin, should his arms not have entwined her at the instant of their recognition? But on the dazing trails he had doubted, surrendered hope of Clara, the while she, by brave and thoughtful self-denial and trust of him, had kept her vows. Dick Trueblood, depraved Chickaman, had corrupted his ideality of womanhood. Away from Clara, his steadfastness,

even to the dream of perpetuity, had lapsed. He cursed himself, a fool and traitor. He burned to make a clean breast of this weakening and take his medicine.

He took the wash-tub from the embers, replenished them; then, opening his pack where he had dropped it, started to make tea and bannocks.

She had defied him — his courage — to face the grinding ice-floes of the Tsana. Was not the destiny of their bodies to survive all perils of the Youngest World an axiom of living? She was right in her decision to launch the boat. Clara was always right, in everything! They two were young and strong, inspired; what beings could better battle and win against the breaking river, even save this maundering old martyr to the North? Gail's heart leaped to the leadership for that adventure. Ever the burden of their omnific future must be his, not hers. He had snatched back her mind from darkness, and it would fail again alone with Laundry, angered as she was there in the cave.

Gail ate on, gulping his tea. At last, taking the pot and a steaming chunk of bread, he hurried back, steeled, under the arch of rock.

He found her seated beside Laundry, their hands clasped. She had bound up the hair on her drooping head, and replaced the guttered candles with a saucer of salmon oil, that floated burning shreds of canvas. He took two cups from the box by her dunnage, filled them with the tea. Clara watched him guardedly.

"The river's open, Adam. But he wants you to die here," she muttered grewsomely, her mind relapsed as he had feared.

"No, no! I give in. I was wrong, and eat my words," contradicted Gail. "I was soft — cruel, too,

—but we'll trust the land to treat us square, and win out by our hardness. We'll start as soon as the river fog lifts."

"Gabriel, bless you!" Clara's frame shook, straightening. Her eyes brightened and danced, meeting his for a space. Neither look flinched. Once more she was wholly alert.

"Let me confess," he entreated. "Blame me. But hear. . . ."

She nodded, dumbly radiant. Gail broke the ban-nock, aroused Laundry. The old man evolved a sepulchral mutter. His blood-shot pupils gleamed, as though he realised how Nature was unlocking his prison with the lure, however specious, of salvation.

The pair ate and drank in silence as Gail nerved himself for his avowals.

"I've been at the brink of defeat, Clara," he began, thrilled by a sudden memory. "Always there I think of Martha. So you seemed like her, in the way you took for granted the awful winter, resigned to fate with her stoic calm — until the spring broke the spell, opened the way down that channel. Then at a fighting chance you sprang into yourself — at bay, a cougar."

"Poor Martha." Clara buried her face in the cup, and her voice quivered. "She couldn't have stood the test."

"I haven't stood the test," he blurted bitterly, "of your love and faith in me. Away from them, life poisons me, unworthy, blind to you. In Chickaman, on the stampede, those callous, pathetic crowds of cynical buffoons weakened your image in me. All the gruelling, the rebuffs, clouded my love, eclipsed my trust in you as the one immutable providence of the great yearning. . . ."

Gail caught his breath. It pierced him that he had never told her of his enduring thirst. At the shots around Attalota's cabin, he had forsworn that rite, until he should attain his goal. But now, though as far as ever from it, he could not contain himself.

Her stare widened, burned sagely, galvanising him. It was he who had lately been speaking, facing their dilemmas, through a haze.

"Great yearning?" she repeated, with a glow of divination. "Like Bob Snowden's for a deathless name? I said once I understood that. Our last words in the cabin."

"I left you then too easily, with not wrench enough, eager to scour the North. It wasn't the sacrifice I boasted of," he plunged on. "An hour passed after I got my grubstake in Chickaman before I thought of you. And yet you spurred me to the top of Lincoln, and I killed Lamar more for love of you than to carry out Bob's wisdom or my own creative dream."

"Creative dream?" she echoed, open-mouthed, spell-bound with awe. "I—I the providence. . . . I see—I see. . . ."

But Gail was deaf to her valiant floundering in the wake of his all-revealing fervour. In this supreme moment of his self-doubts, he saw but her transcendent understanding fully aroused and receptive through the bread and tea—such food as had not nourished her for months.

"Clara, was my love for you weakening, only a lust? Did I believe what men had told me, that women blight the inheritors of life in the Youngest World? I warned you once that my love never measured up to yours. There'd been Martha and my wife before, my ruin.

Wasn't I made for woman — I, who shall never live until I have won a son?"

He paused, gasping, in a sweat of self-abasement. With her ever indomitable resource, Clara keyed her shrewdest intuition to her inalienable love, yet only found answer, woman that she was, in a glad flood of tears.

VI

Groaning, Gail could no more than seize both her hands in his. She controlled herself instantly.

"Maybe we never should have bared our hearts there at Torlina," she answered with a strange tranquillity. "Confidence of possession does blunt a man."

He struck his bosom.

"But I don't forgive you, because there's nothing to forgive, Gail," she pursued in a voice changed low and trenchant. "You've been a man among men. The glamour and throb of life usurps you all. It's in the sex, that — and to lose heart when their dreams are cheated. Otherwise I shouldn't love you — inconstant, aspiring — so. And if I've been more steadfast, it's not my will, but my nature and sex. . . ."

He heard. Her incisive reason sobered him. He thrilled with hope at her breadth of vision.

"I've said before," she continued, "love is more than faith. It wipes out everything. So if you still love —"

"It's 'the test that never ends till death,'" he recalled, calmly. "And we face death."

"It stands with you?" she asked, wistfully.

"Stands? . . . Gods!"

"Then the time has come. Tell me now — everything from the past that I forbade. I know it's too soon, before the fulfillment's certain. But Gail, I shall

know every word you speak, as I know each fibre in your soul and body. . . . I want them—in your breath, on your lips.”

“Yes, too soon,” he burst out, transported, yet oppressed by the old compact of reserve with himself. “Before the bridge lies across the void. But we have the timbers.”

“Gail,” for one so wavering, unsure of himself, she stirred him, cunningly, “this thirst that always impels and rules you, as if from outside yourself, makes you victorious, must be —”

“*Immortality!*” he shouted through the echoing cave.

It was he, not she, who had been mad up to this moment.

He related all concerning Lena, from the point where she had checked him in Attalota’s cabin; about his exceptional ache for parenthood, which the blare of John’s guns outside had quelled. Her lips moved, following each word. Her features set at hearing how Madge Arnold had goaded the flight from his blighted life with Arlene. The night with Martha behind the luminous kilns, the heart-rending hours alone in the lodging house, put a lump into her throat, a haze before her eyes. Her pulses quickened as she heard of Rory, of the resolve to search the emptiness and desires in human hearts, and she stifled a cry at the climax of his perils on Mt. Lincoln in Snowden’s death—that piteous triumph and Bob’s teaching summed in the creed of Charity or Death. Then Gail recounted his wanderings, about Dick Trueblood with his misgivings toward woman, Len Borden and Sydney; the sardonic stampede; himself, finally, a Moses to the North, through *her*.

The flames in the saucer sank. A drip down some hidden facet of the rock began to drum and splutter. A whisper of the restless flocs reached them from far out on the river. The stertorous breathing of old Laundry swept the unseen, overhanging stalactites, as a benediction upon these two heirs of the spring — of all life in the Youngest World.

"You and I, Gabriel," Clara gravely sealed his valedictory, "our blood shan't ever die. . . ."

"But Arlene?" Recollection lashed him.

In the utter dark, he could not see the forecast of her joyous and determined gaze.

"I should like to have known Lena," she said with her old candour; then striving for the lightness ever germane to her elation, "Yes, typical woman of the West. The red-blooded heroine that hats are off to." But her banter wilted. "Where is she now? God help her sort, poor things!"

"With her mother in Sacramento, I hope — and doubt," sighed Gail. "I loved Lena once, as you did your Charley. . . . I've heard nothing, it's unchanged for us."

Retrospection stimulated their breathing. It throbbed, excited, through the pause.

Clara broke the tension:

"Once I spoke of 'the courage of our love and our beliefs.'"

Gail did not answer. He could not, in the ferment swelling through him.

"And just now I said, 'The time has come,'" she went on, simply. "You told me, 'After we lick Lamar, You — forever.' And we killed him. . . . Love sanctifies anything, then or now. It's I—I who am not worthy of yours. It's the deeper love, the more trans-

figuring, "Gail, the germ of all life . . . deathless." Clara's voice rang out, a pean. "Take me, Gail, take me — this needs no courage — it's nothing brave for me to yield. . . . Have me for now . . . eternally. . . ."

They sat motionless. No power of will, no swooning rapture, nor glare of truth beyond belief, withheld from one another their flaming entities of flesh and soul. Only, the future of all the ages — throbbing, lambent, apocalyptic — stretched before them for their fruition.

Each moment was an age, each age a moment.

VII

"And I hear the dawn. That's the first thrush."

A mellow, suspended bird-note confirmed Gail's voice. He was on his feet. An ashen glimmer filled the arch.

"Get our stuff together," whispered Clara, joining him, "then wake Adam."

They emerged on the sand-flat, lit the fire; Gail got water and started breakfast. Roseate gleams tinged the silky mists out among the islands. Window-pane ice had skimmed over the open channel. As they gazed at the wide river arms, still mute and glistening, Gail said:

"Safe enough today, I guess, till the same moment when she broke last night. Unless it's a lot warmer."

He picked up his pack. His hand touched a hard bulge in the canvas. He stood transfixed, with twinkling eyes.

"I forgot. Clara!" he called to her at the fire. "It's a trifling thing now. But you remember how once we worshipped gold as the start of all our trails?"

She sprang to his side, as he murmured, "And gold

has tried us in the fire of life — untarnished — by keeping us apart. And less than the year we allotted. We'll be rich, rich! All Alaska at our feet."

Gail pressed a fragment of the rock into her hands. She turned it over, dazed slightly, as if by the rare sheen. Then, as they sat down to eat, he recited rapidly how the destined find was made and staked, his hopes for realising on it. And listening, she grasped his reawakened exhilaration.

"But tell me about John, and the juggernaut's appeal," he asked at length. "Is the law still making monkeys of us?"

"Nothing so rare as them up here," she flashed back. "But maybe porcupines or a glacier bear, if it doesn't get wise. Donelson, he of that white-livered letter, is a jailed ex-judge. We used it against him. And the new one — appointed by Roosevelt, thank heaven! — has ordered the case tried all over, starting where it was two years ago. The same treadmill."

Ignoring any qualms of danger, they began swiftly packing their meagre outfits. They dragged Adam out of the cave, bed and all. Braced by the fresh air and light, his querulous advice in their preparations showed the imperative, capable man he had once been.

One trip for Gail and Clara down the melting sand-bars, across the frozen slues, and all that each owned in the world was piled by the clumsy, coffin-shaped scow with black pitch oozing from its seams, beached near an open back-eddy. They returned perspiring, although it was hardly five o'clock, and between them carried the withered old man, his head hanging grumbling from the blankets, to where they launched the craft. They loaded the thin sacks on its flat bottom, piling all the bedding and Gail's tarpaulin in the bow. There

they laid Laundry, covered him with a blanket. He seemed to be asleep, as they pushed out into the stream, which veered toward the main Tsana, along a big island dark with spruces, to cut in a bright vein among its solid and tangled courses.

Gail manned the heavy hewn sweeps in the stern cross-seat, Clara rowed amidships; and as the narrow current gripped and swayed them, their hearts thrilled with a delectable, reckless apprehension. Silenced thus, they slipped on easily, sensible of motion only if they watched the forest-processions, inert armies of the flat islands, press backward toward the vanished alps. Gail found himself likening this bewildering entry into a new life, by its very contrast, to his midnight tussle while fording the Atna.

Hours passed. Wavering lines of ducks lagged across the keen heavens; three magpies shook their long black and white tails in a greening ash. Now the scow pummeled a gravel bottom close to shore, then scraped between sharp, honeycombed parallels of ice out through the wastes of it. Their canal of free water threaded from hard vein to vein; zigzagged among interminable islands which split channel after channel. They yielded sleepily to the alluring spell of progress without effort, that paradox in a land where advance is ever battle. They rowed just enough to keep a steerage-way, head on. Furtively their sense of caution was benumbed. Gail's thoughts wandered to Laundry, and the valiant old-timer's long life in the North; to his unbalanced yet sublime craze for mica; and compassion filled him, then hope for the fresh grub on the coast that might cure.

Toward noon Gail, turning continually to look ahead, faced Clara with an exclamation —

"Ho! No more islands. She's all in one channel."

The glacial river-bed narrowed. They slipped out beyond a tongue of the last island, as into a melting desert, and headed to the west shore.

"Phew. Hotter than yesterday," said Clara, gazing forward also. Then, pointing a mile or so below, "Look at that."

There a huge mass of thick ice-cakes, stained with dark streaks of silt, was piled high on shore like a frozen palace stark in the sun.

"They broke in the racket we heard last night," said Gail. "Hello. The whole river down there's open!"

Even as he spoke, they swept out from their wilderness of floes, as if into a pitching lake of grey-green water, its surfaces shot with hissing circles that appeared to be heaved up from bottom. The speed of the current doubled, and, overawed by this combined might of the whole Tsana, they fell to harder at their oars.

"But that's only a handful of what must have split," said Gail, as the ice-pile drew abreast. "Watch! I tell you the water's rising on it. The rest's blocked down river. Listen!" He weighed his oars for a second. "There's the gorge it made, settling, backing up all this water."

They heard a faint, cavernous thudding far ahead. Their speed quickly slackened. Sudden waves, running up-stream, splashed against their bow. But the sight that held their gaze was the plain of ice out of which they had just floated. All the quieting river seemed to be rippling backward thither, burying it. The line of its dull gleaming was stealthily retreating toward the dwindling islands.

"Stand by for when she cracks again," warned Gail. "We'll be swept down." He cast a glance behind, seeing that the whole river veered abruptly east around a sharp bend. "Can't see what's coming."

"We're — all right — I guess," panted Clara.

For a time they kept on rowing close to shore, in an avid silence, shooting their eyes to the mounds of ice and the drift-piles that sinisterly lined the bank. As the river backed up, and the flood crept higher among them, they watched it gurgle among great prone cottonwoods, usually high and dry, and swing out their tops like fingers pointing solemnly into the eddies.

"It's pressing up the ice back there," said Gail. "Loosening her. She'll sag and buckle after the next break. Hark!"

Again the muffled rumbling down-river. Then, after an aching space, arose like an echo a soft, splitting turmoil far astern, which seemed elusively to pierce the air all about, with a resounding as of rended beams of wood. They were sweeping faster around the bend, in the impulse given the river, sinking as it ploughed through the invisible barrier of floes below. They could see it receding from the stranded cakes and shore drift, boiling through the fan-like spread of gaunt and upright roots, majestically bobbing their great trunks up and down. They strained the more at their sweeps, but at first unable to outrun the current, turned broadside once.

"Row!" called Gail, oblivious that they were headed into the bank.

"Ashore? Never!" exclaimed Clara, repudiating the instinctive impulse; thus nerving her woman's dependence into that fierce, transcendent courage, which, once fired, out-dares and out-suffers man's.

The river had broadened. They heard the hidden, raucous drag of pebbles grinding along bottom. Dead ahead, a patch of water that seemed motionless was puckered by a riffle.

"Sandbar!" Gail turned aft from sighting it; from old Laundry suddenly rising out of his blankets.

The reef shouldered them, rocking, down the clear drop of a chute. In a slither of cascading gravels, they swung once more. "Stroke!" Gail ordered. They hit bottom with a resounding bump. The floorboards groaned and bent; a spurt of water and splinters jumped into their faces; but they forged free, and as the shallow contracted aft, Gail added:

"Low tide. Water's all leaving the river, or we're on the wrong side, out of the channels. High and dry soon."

"Ahead — ahead!" cut in Clara, behind him. "See Adam. What's he spotted?" Kneeling on the dunnage, leaning over the bow, back to them, the old man was waving his arms in ardent trepidation, making gagging noises in his throat. In the instant that Gail switched his head, beholding, his heart turned to stone.

"Canyon — another," he said hoarsely.

Forward, the whole Tsana narrowed like a funnel between rising walls. In scarce half a mile, it slipped into the jaws of black and towering crags. "In for it. We're going too fast, too far from shore to land now," he went on, and half in uncontrollable irony, half in cheer, "Can he swim or pray — the old man?"

"Pray yourself, or shut up!" retorted Clara, stolidly, in a single breath, which summed to Gail her bravery, restraint, and unrelenting bravado toward whatever doom.

"If the avalanche from up-river catches us in there," he laughed grimly. "Matchwood!"

"Shakin' hands with the devil, hey?" shrilled out old Adam. "An' afore you meet him! But betch-yer he savvies this yere canyon."

Black boulders, grotesquely water-carved and draped with a greenish slime, dove past them. A low cataract, draping a flat ledge, backed off into its haze with the tremour of a slow explosion. Then a hush fell on the river, the stillness that ushers in a gale.

A moist darkness redolent of river-weeds closed over them. Rugged jaws enfolded, upon a slant and inky, satin surface. The walls flung back the steady whining of their thole-pins, the gulps from caverns breasted by the tide. Lone spruces climbed high, like sentinels in niches of the serrate cliffs. Under the shred of sky, sheer pinnacles marched craftily, hypnotically, among one another. But it drew the eyeballs from their sockets, even silenced Adam leaning rigid over the side, to see the monuments of ice, heaped castle after castle of wrecked floes, hanging, balanced on every brink of shore, and green-opalescent in the gloom, exhaling chilly breaths.

Slowly motion possessed the glossy avenue; it coiled, curved, dappled with specks of foam. The scow lurched, racing ever faster, a chip down the ribbed pathway of a flume.

"Pull — your guts out!" yelled Gail.

They bent fiercely to the sweeps, with numb and aching arms; but without avail to head the water. The canyon twisted. Swinging uncontrolled, they drove around sharp corners which tossed up ruffs of spray; dropped through the defiant trumpeting of rapids,

twirled among grisly mid-stream ledges, ever to be flung against blind walls, which ever dissolved and opened miraculously onward. Then —

The sunlight blinded them. They shot free, yet helpless, out of the canyon. Laundry gave a faint whoop.

“Made it! Safe!” came Gail’s voice steadily, shattering the tension. He threw a glance forward over his shoulder, and at the immanence which greeted him, ripped out an oath. It spelled destruction. There, barred by a throng of little islands, the river lay all solid again. The flood dipped under a chaos of ice-cakes strewn on the brilliant petrification of its surface. Just above, on the near bank, rose a great mound of bleached, scarred trunks. His heart leaped to this one hope. It might shelter a back-water.

“Shore, Clara, hit for shore. It’s grub-time, hey? Edge in if we can’t outrun the current. On your right oar — right. To that drift-pile. Look! . . . Answer! . . .”

His calmed voice wavered despite all effort. He snapped his teeth together.

“Clara! . . . Clara — don’t you hear?”

She did not answer. She had stopped rowing. The river yanked at her sweep, tore it from the combing. Her head fell between her shoulders, and she slid aft, under his own seat. *She* — he could not believe it.

“Gail — my arms. . . . Gail!” she cried. “Only my body’s quit.”

Adam was voicing his desperation at that malignant barrier speeding toward them, with the groan:

“Hills o’ my mica yonder, Clary. . . . Oh, Clary — huntin’ further ain’t no use.”

VII

Gail plugged on, tigerishly, at his right sweep, unleashing the uttermost power of his tendons. Only seconds remained to their mad careening — a time forever blurred, interminably lengthened.

A murmur reverberated across the sounding-board of water. Profound and cosmic, it issued from the rocky walls astern, and the drift-pile echoed a furtive crackling, as of flames. Gail felt his heart beating in his ears. A damp wind sprang up, chilled his sweaty, streaming face. A sea-gull from the coast swooped low before his bulging eyes. A cloud of mistiness had puffed out of the receding, empty jaws of rock.

"Don't — don't jump, whatever happens," he shouted once, whirled by a maze of cross-currents, in the illusion that Clara was still working behind him.

The dull sound fell as if from mid-air, then mounted with racking, grinding overtones, and culminated in a roar. A humped, green dome of water welled from the black portals. The scow breasted it, dizzily. The earth shivered. With a deafening thunder, the canyon vomited its juggernaut.

For an instant the spectacle blotted all fear, held Gail entranced. In the back of his head he seemed to see and hear the crash and leaping of all the rivers in Alaska, re-creating his Youngest World.

First a welter of moving, noisome cakes. Behind, like the ramparts of a glacier endowed with titanic life, the mountain of ice, all the floes that they had threaded hours back. An immensity of somnolent and shimmering emerald, scarred and sodden with muds and gravel. On it ploughed, haltingly, at a stuttering, in-

exorable pace. Over and over, layer after layer, white masses slid out, rolled clumsily upon themselves, tossing branches, bark, whole trees torn from the rock ledges. Muddy water poured over its top, spilled in sudden cataracts.

A vinegary feeling crept under Gail's ribs. The first cakes had reached him. A stump crashed into his oar. He sprang to his feet with a wild curse. Close to, he saw the gnarled summit of the drift-pile, just topped by the water. An island of ice lifted him, and he hung poised with an uncanny steadiness. Turning turtle, the cakes dropped the scow on her left beam. He found himself standing on her side, gripping the seat, and beside him — Clara, chalky-faced, but revived in all her vigour, struggling forward to reach Laundry, where he rolled among dunnage and blankets, maundering about death and some unheard-of daughter.

A whitened tree arm from the drift-pile reached and smote Gail's head. It seemed to draw them toward shore. An avalanche of floes fell on the stern and stove it. Dim and far away, Gail heard the tumult of the dark waters that poured over him. But stunned in his frenzy, he saw nothing.

He opened his eyes, lying in a patch of moss on the steep shore. Clara leaned over him.

"You —" he muttered. "You saved us."

"No — no — when the trunk caught you. It swung us into the back-eddy. I only held the log, like death. We climbed onto the drift-pile, while the ice passed."

"The break-up!"

"You should have seen that, Gail. Marching across the North." Her voice steadied. "But we've lost all the grub and blankets, though I saved the axe."

"Then we can raft. A day to build one. A day to the coast in this current."

Gail rose on an elbow, and stared out upon the open waters of the spring.

"The old man, Laundry?" he asked. "Where?"

Clara turned her head away. Gail saw her body shaking, heard her gasp.

"Dead — when I got him here. In the brush along shore."

For a moment neither spoke.

"It was to be, in the break-up," she said clearly, at last.

"Break-up. Beginning! . . ."

"I knew that we'd win, Gail," she murmured, "by daring it. Come, first we'll bury him."

VIII

Again it was midnight. They lay under the close thatch of a giant spruce, waiting for the first streak of day; snatching an hour of rest between grave-digging with the axe, and resharpening it to hew logs for binding into a raft with strips of clothing.

Their tragedy, hunger, the escape, had made the silence poignant and searching.

"We're really the dreamers, Gail, we women," suddenly harked back Clara to their avowals in the cave.

"Creators, too," said Gail, gravely, linking his arms more strongly about her, "of life out of the reasonless, impalpable — Love."

"Yes. But fierce as all existence. Tangible as fire. The fruition's only the seal, the testimony of the God-like will that lies behind all."

Their lips met. One star pressed through the spi-

nous, radiating branches. A squirrel set up his soothing chatter.

"And the man yearns," he whispered, drinking in her warm breath, "no more for his own continuance and the future, than for the image of the mother in the son."

"Gabriel!" . . .

It was ordained. All time, the starry whirl of coming æons, swung upon the axis of them.

He had flamed first, in the cave, with his instinctive and ideal purposes. Not until Death had now broken around them, did their bodies enfold one another. . . . Which love was the more omnipotent? . . . There could be but one — so deep, all-effacing, self-concealing — attuned perfectly with the silent processes of Nature, in the slow mill of the revolving spheres.

BOOK FIVE

CHAPTER XVII

THE WIFE

I

NEARLY a year and a half had passed.

Gail had found the address of Laundry's daughter among papers in the trading post at Beluga. With Jim Shaw, the yankee skipper of the monthly mail-boat *Alice*, he had appraised the old man's stock at \$500, and sent a money-order for that amount to Janet Laundry in Oregon, out of the \$600 from the sale of Borden's dog-team. Then in November, as the fur-trade on Cook Inlet had for years been unprofitable, he and Clara sledged their outfit a hundred miles westward across the Alaskan Peninsula to Nushak Bay, on Bering Sea. There, in the Aleut village of Chigmit, near five large salmon canneries which in summer steamed and clanked on the barren shores of the river-mouth, they built their log store. For more than a year they had lived here, enlisting the natives to hunt for them, dickering with the cannery managers to sell the Tsana discovery.

It was now late September, 1905. And Clara remained childless.

This morning she stood at the sink, plunging the breakfast dishes into the soapy water. Her eyes were

fixed alertly upon the muddy vastness of Nushak River estuary through the window. Seated upon the bench under it, by a box of sickly geraniums and pink-flowering trefoil that craned toward the cold light, Gail was silently weaving the gut web of a narrow native snowshoe. Content and prosperity shone from their big Russian bunk with its ermine spread, in the black-and-nickel range new from Seattle, the pictures from illustrated weeklies tacked to the newspapers that covered the clay-chinked walls, the roll-top desk salvaged from the wreck of a Cape Nome "liner." Only the domestic air of parenthood was lacking — eternally. But this drear emptiness to which they had bravely inured themselves, today was deepened by a newer, less brooding, but more trenchant anxiety. An expectant tension filled the cabin. An event was at hand.

The August visit of the *Alice* had brought them news from Steve Merrill, the keen-faced, astute young foreman of the Kussiloff plant, whose ardour for the North had attracted Gail. He had "placed" the Tsana claim. Returning to San Francisco in July, he wrote that he had bonded Gail's ground for \$10,000 to a man named Bleven. Bleven's party was starting north immediately. They would reach Chigmit on the mailboat's September trip, assured by Merrill that Gail would at once guide them inland to inspect his find. The inanity of this, since in a month the whole land would be sealed under snow, had angered, then puzzled, Gail; it was like the impetuous Stephen just out of school whose father owned the cannery. But could there be any other reason for the haste?

By noon the *Alice* would be three days overdue. As the old converted whaler should have been entering the bay, a storm had swept it, which the Indians reported

had wrecked the schooner belonging to Sim Roberts, the village squawman, and drowned him.

"This Bleven never would have held us to hiking for the Tsana after snow comes," said Gail, "unless he had horses and the feed for them. What was it Steve wrote about our dogs?"

"To have the team ready," answered Clara, "in case I guess —"

She hesitated at Gail's conceding nod. Each sensed the precaution which the North implants for such a winter journey.

"We might have made it in there in two months, though," said Gail. "But his feet would have froze, the first look-see at these tundras. Poor guys!" His words assumed that the *Alice* was lost. His unconcern that this chance seemed gone for realising his dream of riches was disturbing. "Well, it's the last day I give them. If she's not in by night, I'm hitting down shore to Herndon Flats tomorrow with Chelthan to look for wreckage."

Clara said no more, and Gail rose to peer through the small window. The thirty-foot tide was high in the wide estuary. As ever, raised by mirage, drifting tree-trunks from the wooded interior hung as watery dots in the dour autumn air; the far, low banks of saffron cottonwoods traced a crumpled line against the immense, grey-red desolation of moss which met the mountains beyond an incalculable space. Seaward, down the peninsula, these appeared like a string of ice-bergs, rising into the glittering chaos of blue-gemmed peaks about the St. Sophia Volcano. Northward the ranges melted, and drawing closer — strangely carved, of a flinty, dull peacock nakedness — marked the direction, 300 miles northeast, of Tsana

River. From Chigmit the shortest route to Gail's eldorado lay overland, not up the Tsana as from Beluga; and as his eyes wandered thither, over the green onion domes of the Russian Church and two closed canneries across the river with their long rows of windows, Gail said reminiscently:

"Clara. Unhappy. We've not been that?"

He had never before referred so directly to the balked issue of their long union. But Bleven's added failure seemed to him to justify an unsealing of his lips, ever less patient than hers.

He did not turn for a reply, for he was sure that he would get none. In all these months of their growing chagrin, it had been Clara more than Gail who had faced his disappointment with a reverent and dominating silence; who more forbore and hoped; whose reserve was greater, if her content was less.

Only the word "love," heretofore so often in her mouth, passed it no longer. But Gail knew that the flame had but retreated beneath the ashes of their barren days, ever ready to burst forth again. She guarded it the more zealously of the two, for now, as during his wanderings, this half-attainment had slowly undermined his self-reliance.

But the green domes of the little church recalled to him the incomprehensible ceremony of their wedding there. Clara had suggested it, at first whimsically, in the flush of their early happiness and ardour. Later she had insisted on the step, and not quixotically, after opposing Gail's notion of going to Seattle to trace Lena and convince her that justice entitled them both to a legal freedom. And Gail had yielded in her rather jocular spirit. They had stood together before the bright tinsel ikons of the gaudy altar, the vivid dado

of paintings (turned out by the gross in Moscow) showing the Miracle in the Manger, among shabby, awed Indians and countless candles, as the bearded priest, Mike Azoff, on his year's round of the bleak coast in his bidarki — marrying, baptising, burying — having shed his odorous *kamaleika* for the lavish robes kept in the tiny vestry, had smilingly repeated the rigmarole of his Greek faith. Then, re-crossing the river, Clara had forestalled any reproach for sacrilege by saying, "If you *are* free, Steve Merrill says the job will stand. But I needed it to cinch my conscience, like any woman dresses up for an ovation. And mine is for life, Gail." Her voice had lowered with grim courage, as she added, defiant: "What's God in his heaven to say, if there is one, when He knows as I do that I'm honest and right so long as we keep our faith?"

At this moment, so long since, her words recurred to Gail. "Yes, our faith in life's still too big," he echoed half-consciously. "Even this comfort is too rare to risk." But his jaw dropped.

"The trip might have helped, foolish or not, winter or no," she sought practically as ever to wrest his mind from brooding. "I've been thinking how a bite of sour dough bread, a frozen foot, or some josh about the beans might put us on our mettle again. It's the bears live highest in the ice, or where the picket-pins are scarce, that raise the cutest families and the biggest."

She laughed, with a touch of the cheer and vigour in her old raillery; then sighed tremulously, but with a note of relief and resolution. Lifting some steamy granite-ware plates with a clatter, she began to wipe them. Through the open door leading into the store, where pale lynx pelts and steel traps hung from the

rafters, came guttural voices, the sift of sugar in a barrel, the click of a scale. The tall gaunt-cheeked Chelthan, the old chief who clerked for Gail, was making a sale to a shawled squaw with a papoose in the bundle of moss upon her back.

"I thought I was starting life again with you," doggedly reverted Gail, nevertheless. "Perhaps I went too far back, or never deserved a woman so fine. Anyone might have done me. And damn this gold!"

With a sudden impulse, mortified at his resignation, he threw down the snow-shoe, and striding across the neat rag carpet seized Clara's bare wet arms and kissed her cheeks fiercely.

"Let's be outspoken with ourselves," she struggled free with her wiry strength. "I know all you've got to grudge, against life and me. But we're making our own world up here, like any wolverine — agreed that only death can stump us. We won there on the Tsana by keeping the stiff lip, and against the worst odds this harsh land offers. I tell you we're fighting that way to the end, and no shaking with the devil till we meet him, like poor Adam used to say."

"If I only had some belief, in someone. Something — besides myself — and you," he stammered, "now Nature and this land have failed."

She fixed him with her deep oval eyes; but he shrank from her, his head plunged on his bosom, swarming with oppressive doubts.

"Oh, don't think," she cried, "I'm not just as miserable, wanting the same what you crave . . . the kid."

Her voice filled, tender, anguished. It was her first, avowed confession.

"Clara!" He stared at her, palpitant there, through a glad mist.

He deserved a taunt, scorn, irony, for his repudiations; but with the finality and insight of that creature of the wild she was, Clara rallied and overwhelmed him with this trumpet-call. . . . And once he had inspired her deliverance — from Lamar. Gail felt with shame that the place of man and woman had been transposed.

Clara wiped her hands, put the dishes on the shelf, and took up the moccasins that she had been embroidering. Gail plunged out into the store to cool and assemble his thoughts.

II

Chelthan behind the counter, among bolts of calico, cutlery, rusty bacon sides, still was clucking to the bright-shawled squaw. The crippled boy, Ataka, was bundling moose hides. The oily nutritious tang of salmon exuded from the three. Distraught, Gail sat on a heap of flour sacks. The old man, with a touch of Russian blood in his square brow and the grey fuzz on his chin (that he plucked out with copper pincers) summed, in the querulous, privation-graved lines of his simple face the calm monotony of Gail's life as a trader, his rule and power over the savages.

His people! Here, far from the stream of gold-seekers, their racial traits yet undistorted, good-faith and sincerity were mutual. Yet they were doomed in any future for the land. Improvidence was the deep canker in their fire and endurance on the hunt. In his defeat Gail had engrossed himself with them; they had mitigated it; he had found an ease in life which went against the grain of his masterful aspirations. And this was wrong, false to the allegiance to his elemental dreams, to be content, cut off from the prevailing multitude, whatever its end in the North might be.

He disliked the acute and citified foremen of the canneries. Untouched by and ignorant of the true North, they looked upon it as a summer purgatory. Except Steve Merrill, and Mike Azoff once a year, he had no white friends but little Shainfut, the Jew fur-buyer, and poor Roberts, dulled and degraded, an outcast from natives and whitemen alike for his miscegenation. The trader came in March, joking and shivering in his costly sea-otter coat at the square deal he gave for Gail's pelts. Sim spent all day fishing for grayling in the creeks from the hills. And he had once been a revenue cutter engineer, on the Pribyloff patrol, cashiered for clumsily smuggling seal-skins.

Gail sought the board-walk in front of the post. It ran the length of the settlement, on a strip of shore under the sculptured terraces of the estuary, between a squdgy tidal creek and the sea-arm. The shingle dropped from his feet for the sheer five fathoms of the tide, upon miles of oozy, glistening reaches, where white gulls shrieked and circled; but this morning the flood tide washed up to the coarse-leaved sand plants which in summer bloomed with yellow flowers in the large gravel by his door. The tide! Twice a day its brown waters poured inland at seven miles an hour, and that welling and ebb measured time and the years there, governed travel and life, milled eternity. Half sunk underground, the native *barrabaras*, with their rotted logs patched or gaping, and on each mud roof a brown wrack of tall weeds, now seemed floating away on its glazy surface. And the drying standards for salmon, with poles askew, still loaded with the split and gutted red fish, half dried and half decayed; the tall winter caches like huge rickety bird-houses on the tops of high piles, cast grotesque and sinuous reflections. It was a village asleep;

only tips of the long swamp grass showed on the water; mangy and mongrel dogs dozed on their door-steps; invisible within, the bucks lolled and smoked, the *klootchmen* forever mended moccasins.

But soon the water began to fall furtively, and Chigmit awoke. Matted tussocks emerged green and shiny, about the leafy shelters where untended fires boiled the fresh fish. Slimy hillocks of clay appeared on the creek side, threaded by soggy paths; and down these trooped the squaws packing their infants, whining dogs, children; and frowsy girls with large wicker nets at the ends of short poles, to sit in the high tufts of grass and ply them swiftly, for the last run of salmon was on. Thus they had lived on this sub-Arctic coast before the fabulous days of the Russians. And they had won Gail — even the stink, the sordidness, the savage confusion; the piercing yelps of their ravening wolf-dogs beaten on the forage; the dishevelled women hacking the scarlet fish, where blow-flies hid their maggot-nourishing eggs. It had all become life to him.

He marked Roberts' cabin up on the terrace, in its square potato patch slanted to catch the sun. His squaw was digging there, bending in a calico sun-bonnet over the dead and dragged vines, likely still ignorant of Sim's death. These Aleuts shrank from spreading sorrow, refined pain by secrecy. Their reserve toward death seemed somehow linked, blighting, with their unaggressiveness in life. But the little blue porch, under the one window in its tiny gable, seemed eloquent of Sim, and of the wreck he was, moon-faced and degenerate for having violated the axiom of race survival.

Anchored below the church, lay the great bark that sailed from 'Frisco in May with Chinamen for the A.

T. Co's. canneries. Now after the storm, leafy squares of canvas were rising to her yards. Her gross and reddish yet trim hull was getting underway to return with the season's pack. Gail would be glad when she was gone, for the despoiling factories recalled Madge Arnold and her suicidal pioneering. Always his friendliness with Merrill had been chilled by their back-ground, although Steve had ever seemed to be revolting from his bondage, and was the one link that Gail had with mankind.

No! He had not been unhappy. But there lay his weakness, the softness against which Trueblood had warned. Happiness had never been the end of his self-seeking. He could win only by a ruthless fight, against all that was false in life, its vanities, illusions, every source of flagging manhood and decay, even that now surrounding him; by hardness, persistence, goading on the strong in purpose, blotting out the consuming weak. This ease had chilled his ardour for gold, that prime source of the bread without which life could not breed. All his solutions had failed. Here, in the dark of a dead age, remoter from civilisation than any lonely trail, he had lost his grip on the wilderness. Living had become a slothful changeling of his perils on Mt. Lincoln, of the strife against Lamar and mushing with the Yukon elect; he had become a part of Chigmit, quite as of Chickaman. He had trusted too much to that destiny which had given him Clara and gold; it had insidiously enervated him. Flexible, acquiescent, he was not even restless. He deserved to lose.

And he had prated to her of his faith in life. Yet life was not gained by faith alone, but by war! A revulsion seized him. Relentless Nature had taken the bit in her teeth, tricked his slow-moving idealism. He

could deceive himself no longer. He had not even been happy. He was at the same nadir of hope as in the Yanaga camps. Woman and the land had not requited him. There remained only the self — the self ever; the lone man's power of soul and sinew; his brain, with the wild beast's roving menace, destroying that he should be perpetuated, blind to charity or death — even to the hardy hosts that should inherit the North, that multitude in its remoteness now — the herd!

Suddenly, low and distant, a reverberating murmur shattered these searing thoughts. Gail raised his head, stiffened, gazing down the bay. The hoarse whistle persisted.

His eyes made out a darkish speck — the *Alice* — creeping across the gleaming waste, just under the plummy tree of steam ascending from the St. Sophia.

Beside himself, Gail shouted to the cabin.

III

In a moment Clara in her blue calico had joined him. Speechless, breathing quickly, they watched the tiny black hulk, with her soiled foresail and one slim stack, creep like a cardboard toy, slowly growing larger, toward the bleak cape below the settlement.

"They'll just make it to here, bucking this ebb," said Gail after a time, seizing one of Clara's hands. "Have to anchor close in, if they've got horses, and go out on the next tide."

The presence of these unknown men, holding his fate in hand; their looks and natures, approaching this void coast, filled with resolutions, desires, all the preconceived convictions of civilisation, sprang out to confuse him. Gail saw himself disputed as a proprietor of the North. He bristled inwardly, resenting their power of the world

outside, with which his isolation had as if for an eternity lost him any touch. A wave of misgiving swept him. How was he prepared for this final showdown?

"Hark!" exclaimed Clara, shading her eyes with a hand.

Though crawling at a snail's pace, the *Alice* was now close in. A smudge of brown smoke, from the Cook Inlet lignite that she dug from the shore and burned, lay in a low trail over the chilly wilderness of the sea. Clara had caught the rattle of a winch. They saw the square covers of the fo'castle hatch opening.

"Then they've got horses, and mean business," she said. "Livestock always goes forward aboard."

Their sluggish, peaceful world was being overturned. Gail's arm stole about her waist in a warm embrace of protection — self-protection. The awkward hulk seemed to have stopped, under a wedge of wan gold in that sky streaked with cloud and darkness. They stood rooted, hearing their heart-beats.

"I wonder what they're like," Gail succeeded in saying. "This Bleven, and how many others."

"Mightn't almost anyone help us out?" said Clara, wistfully. "Any pace they put us through." And her daring arose before Gail, assuringly, virile yet ever womanly, ready to be stretched without snapping to the breaking-point.

They heard the rumble of an anchor chain. Again the whistle; and scarcely was its ribbon of steam whipped to blankness, than all the dogs of Chigmit broke loose. Howls echoed the blast, distorted it, in that weird, savage crescendo, so unseating to whitemen's ears no matter how familiar, that essence of the tragedy in hunger and the white cold.

The beasts stirred from the clayey dust of their beds,

out of the creek; plunged down and up the little paths across it; scattered and slunk away as they neared the store, and the blind bravado of their uproar died in cowardly whines. Then a patter of moccasins; and the young squaws appeared, tousle-haired and bare-legged, scuttling after; the slow-motioned, burgeoning mothers, with heads and babes shawled; and last, hands in pockets, the lounging bucks in red jerseys and citified felt hats, over faces set in a vapid insolence.

They gathered around Gail, for perhaps the last time, intent on the big monthly event of the year. Patriarchal Nicolai, solemn Chelthan, Sim's wife in her sun-bonnet, the limping Ataka. The creatures who served him as a father, whom Clara nursed in their squalor when sick. There was supplication in their silent looks. It seemed as if their shy glances owned that some epochal change was at hand. A sense of loss and regret filled Gail's heart, a foretaste of homesickness at the breaking ties.

The *Alice* swung at anchor. The gurgle of the out-boiling tide sounded on her ice-scarred prow. Beyond, a great root floated past like a swimming bear.

"There's Sarah Shaw at the wheel," said Clara, indicating the squat cubical pilot-house, and the prim, bony woman, famous in the North, leaning from it in a knit grey jacket. "Jim's drunk below, of course, when he smells port."

"Wonder how they stood the blow," said Gail. "I don't see anything carried away. Hello. . . . There they are."

He pointed forward, to the open hatch. Two figures, one tall and lean, one short and stocky, younger, had appeared around it. In the new light-coloured khaki of chechakos, they stood out distinct among the

weathered, hulking forms of the Norse sailors, who were ready with ropes and tackle to unload the horses.

A third person like them emerged from the wheel-house.

"More than two's in the party," said Clara. "There must be. By —! That's the other, in the knickerbockers."

She had started, withdrawn herself from Gail's arms. She shot him a fearsome glance, filled with the boding of a woman's intuition.

"Walks funny, doesn't he?" said Gail of the newcomer; then paused, adding, "And wears his hat —"

He fixed his in-sloping eyebrows at an acuter angle. He felt his high cheekbones flush and his nostrils pucker.

"Moves like —" he hesitated, "a woman toggled out in men's clothes."

"It is," affirmed Clara.

The woman was talking to the first pair and dressed as they; plainly there were no other passengers; unquestionably the trio were one outfit.

Gail saw Clara's breast lift, quivering, and fall. She stepped out of his sight, behind him. They stood rigid, silent and dumbfounded.

IV

The first horse, a sorrel, dangled above the hatch from the spidery arm of the winch, suspended in a rope mat looped around his belly. He struggled desperately, as he swung aloft over the racing tide, whipping neck and mane, back humped and four legs converging helplessly. The stolid sailors, now in bright slickers, had lowered a boat with curses and warnings about the current. The beast dropped, dove, splashed sprawling beside it. At first he tried to swim upright, furiously

beating spray with his forelegs. The men shouted, tugged at their oars against the rip, headed him for shore.

Another and another were yanked up at the intermittent grinding of the hoist, plunged overboard into white geysers. Out of a continuous tumult of oaths and shouting, a broken procession of them aimed swimming for the beach, bucking the ebb, arching their necks and haunches against its force, snorting frenziedly through stretched nostrils. Unable to make land in front of the store, they slid sidewise far down the spit.

"Want to have them drown, do they?" broke out Gail once.

One by one they ploughed out on the flat at the creek-mouth, wearily lifting bedraggled withers and shoulders. They shivered, dazed for a moment; then, with a snort at their safety, charged off careering, prancing in all directions, shaking themselves, up and down the shore.

"Damn those dogs — damn them!" cried Gail quick-temperedly, as a yelping wave of them sped off to hound and worry the terrified animals. "Can't they shut up, now of all times?"

Chigmit was in an uproar. All the bucks and young squaws, who had been watching the scene intent and muttering to themselves, broke after their beasts with savage exclamations, to round up the horses into the old corral down the bar.

Out on board, the after hatch was open, and the outfit's freight was appearing from the hold. But the passengers were to go ashore first. The three figures had collected at the sea-ladder, where the crew, now with the cutter alongside, held her in the surging water, and called up to the deck for them to embark. But only one of them did so (there being no room in the boat for

the other two), the shorter and younger, somewhat chunky figure. For a second he peered gingerly over the rail, then lithely seized the ropes, and dropped down with an athletic swing into the stern. And just as she was shoving off, a sallow man in blue carrying a canvas sack, whom Gail marked as Mortimer, the purser, with his mail-bag, followed and joined him.

Gail and Clara watched them draw closer, slantwise, buffeted by the tide, the sailors working like automatons. Their broad, moving shoulders hid the stranger. But hard as they rowed, Gail's store slipped upstream. Clara started down for the back-eddy which the horses had gained, and Gail followed her, close and quickly. When they reached it, the heavy craft had grounded, the bearded rowers were pulling in their oars with a clatter, and Mortimer had leaped to the beach.

"One letter for you, Thain," said the purser, "and the only one. Looks like Merrill's fist. I'll sign and leave it in the store," he added, as if he had seen Gail but yesterday; and hurrying past, climbed the bank. It struck Gail that there might be discretion in his brevity. Mortimer must have learned all Bleven's purposes in their long voyage.

"Hello — you're Thain?" then said the man in whose hands lay the future. He spoke with a bold assurance, in a voice rather high-pitched, as he extended his right arm in greeting.

"Bleven, yes," answered Gail, taking it, and outdoing his decision; but with an effort, and conscious that the fellow's dark greenish eyes were fixed on Clara.

"My God, I'm glad to see you!" averred Bleven. "Knew you right off. How goes it?"

"We've been thinking it didn't 'go,' till just now,"

Clara cut in lightly. "I'm his wife, Mrs. Thain. Stephen Merrill told you?"

"Ah—" Bleven bowed as if taken a-back. There was a silent moment.

He was young, rather muscled than heavy; and his features small in proportion; dark and smooth-skinned yet not sallow. His hair, black, straight, and somewhat oily, curved in a shock upon a wide, high forehead. His shaven chin was narrow but square, with two dimples low at the sides of queerly thin, compressed lips. Above all, his flesh hid a strong frame, and he stood slightly bow-legged, with an athlete's out-bent knees.

"Where were you in the blow?" began Gail.

He answered in a tone as if Gail should have known, "Why, Herndon Bay. Battened down and anchored in the lee of old Sophia, you bet!"

He smiled with an almost aggressive geniality; but a large vein running down the middle of his smooth forehead, between his lustrous eyes, swelled for an instant and gave his face a look of strain.

"Some tide you've got here," he said abruptly, glancing seaward, where the cutter was pulling back to the steamer. "Must be fifty feet where the Nushak pinches her. Had a scow now, we could sail the outfit up when we start tomorrow." He paused; then, "What doesn't go?"—but he had turned to Clara. "You don't need to tell me the grass is frozen everywhere on your smiling *tundras*. We got forty bales Yakima timothy for the horses."

"I thought so," she said, with a justified glance at Gail, "about the horses."

"That's right for this season, with snow coming,"

Gail conceded, all apathy crumbling before the man's buoyant resolution, his unexpected fore-reading of the land. "But you're not set to start tomorrow."

"Ain't I?" he laughed aloud, but more with encouragement than disdain for Gail's first reluctance.

"We can't carry feed with a pack-train," persisted Gail decisively. "Have you got sleds? We'll have to wait anyhow for snow."

"Sleds? Sure! And pray for snow," he interjected, with a not unpleasant irony, and plunged on, "Then there'll be your dogs. But didn't Steve write you the conditions of my option? Of course — Morty's got the letter. You'll want to hot-foot it to the Tsana faster than I do when you read her, if all Steve's told me about Gail Thain is true. You might have heard, too, at that."

"Heard what?" demanded Gail.

Bleven's eyes narrowed on him, but with a grin too compelling to arouse resentment even when he explained, "That you've been loose-mouthed about this find of ours. Talked too much, I judge, the same as I do. It's all over the States, spread by these canners. Seattle's booming the Tsana for spring. The rabble's coming. We've got to act quick, be on the river first. And by hell, we can do it!"

For an instant Gail's body burned, both in shame for his indiscretion and with offence at the man's harsh frankness. But his sharp insistence was uplifting. All the hot intensity of Gail's visions in Chickaman, of his transfigured life as he had knelt in the gulch that May afternoon, gold in his hands, swept through him, fired at last. Bleven was the man, it struck him, for such an enterprise, for a race like this. The glamour of his eldorado, the leadership in the North that he had

dreamed of, could be regained. So this was the reason for Merrill's absurd compact! He saw and felt all that feverish power of a stampede, the relentless, dramatic turmoil of distant multitudes, the hordes of an Hocherda and the chosen of the North, mixed indistinguishably before his own conquering in the wild spaces.

Clara's quick breathing brought him to earth.

"I told you, Gail. I told you—" she said, laying a hand on his shoulder, her head bent intently forward. He saw the exuberant curl of her firm lips.

"Oh, Bleven. My wife—" he began firmly. "I wrote Steve. She's coming with us."

Bleven started and eyed Gail, but with a good-humoured if curious smile. "Of course. . . . So is mine."

For a moment they looked open-mouthed at one another; then Bleven, as if oblivious of Clara, let out a chuckle, which to Gail tightened their bond.

"Out there," she cut in, confronting Bleven. "Is that who she is? Your wife?"

Gail started, looked out toward the *Alice*, as if he had forgotten the woman in trousers, and his face fell. Bleven paled slightly; his features clouded, then set.

"Well, you know in this country," he hesitated, turning to Gail, "how a man gets fixed."

"Talk to her about that," said Gail, motioning to Clara with a sudden uneasiness, his eyes still lingering off-shore.

"Oh, don't mind me," she interposed coldly. "I know about women up here. We'll be quite a party."

"I'm off for those horses," said Gail, breaking the instant of silence. "Clara, take him up to the shack. And get that letter from Morty and read it."

"Come on, Mr. Bleven. You stopped in Valdez —" and Gail heard her ask him about John Hartline's lawsuit; his answer that it was still "*sub judice*."

But as they went, Gail did not stir. Hands in his pockets, he gazed out to the black ship. The landing-boat was again at the ladder, which the two remaining passengers were now descending. Something engrossed him in the movement of the woman's knees in their knickerbockers. His eyes widened, his lips parted. Once he turned to see Clara, speaking earnestly, her black hair flowing in the raw wind, beside Bleven who was walking in his muscle-bound way. The natives, having stood apart during their talk, followed them at a distance, leaving Gail alone.

Down the spit, he could see the corral now filled with horses. The dogs were still worrying them. Their backs moved above the log fence, on which several shouting young bucks were perched.

But the cutter had cast off again.

The woman and the lean man approached, also concealed behind the slickered oarsmen. Yet as always in a repeated scene, they hove down upon Gail with creaking thole-pins twice as quickly. He remembered afterward what had seemed their reckless, giddy pace on the last of the ebb. Yet mingled with this was the thought that they would have to hurry, not to ground and lie stuck on the mud-flats for six hours, for the bottom was showing yonder in glossy domes of ooze. But immediately that the boat struck beside him, a haze formed in Gail's eyes, an iron hand twisted his vitals, and he staggered back.

He knew the woman in the knickerbockers, with the broad Stetson hat tilted back of her squarish, blond features.

V

She stood before him. It was his wife, Arlene.

Gail felt that if her tall companion had exclaimed as he saw them there, white face to face, crouching back with fluttering eyelids, he would either have collapsed or struck the man. But the sharp-faced, oldish fellow grasped some dilemma with the swift incisiveness of his sort on the frontier; and ducking his head, yet with a smile of repressed unction, hurried past them up to the post. Gail got the notion of lank, bent limbs, a heavy watch-chain in the breast pocket of his jumper; of bristling and snow-white hair above a very red and hatchet face which was pitted with the bluish powder marks that an exploding cartridge makes.

For a while neither Gail nor Lena spoke. Breath had left them; their eyes clashed sightlessly. The sailors, hard at work sloshing in mud and water up to their knees, were pushing out the boat, oblivious of the meeting.

Gail strove, by grasping the present and the future, to breast the choking avalanche of the past, the marvel and mystering of the intervening years. Could Lena be to this man Bleven what Clara was to him? The coincidence was unlikely, even in the adventitious life of the frontier. Could Lena be divorced? — he thought fiercely. . . . He read her, steadying her soul to the mere verity of existence.

“No! It’s not you Gabriel,” she cried in falsetto, shivering. “But it’s I, yes, Lena — come to this.”

“To what?” His husky challenge was involuntary. He could not down the old affection, the years of dreams and tolerance steeped in the glamour of his youth, the naked confidence that welds the once-beloved no matter

how or why repudiated. Equally her sordid revelations, the blighting revulsion, that had driven him from the strawberry fields, and the disloyalty, even cowardice, of his broken promise to return, faded in those braver memories.

"Let me tell you," she beseeched. "I couldn't stand the life without you. I've searched, looked for you everywhere. You were my only hope out of where I sank. But understand—" her voice was gathering vehemence, "I gave up hope long ago. You failed in your word not to desert me, and I've not come here to be your wife."

"You're not my wife?" Gail's heart leaped to the coveted inkling.

"Wait!" she succumbed again, penitent with shame. He saw the forced pride of her charge. Her full breast shook. The oblong brow above her pale and bird-like eyes, under the frizzled yellow hair, grew distorted. Gail was torn in self-reproach, foreboding, guilt, between thrusting her from him and taking her into his arms. Then,

"C-can't you see — everything?" she broke into unappeasable sobs of self-pity and exasperation.

The poignancy of her abasement spread through Gail slowly, with a festering pain.

And yet as she stood there, her face bowed, hands limp at her sides, he could not stifle the thought that she seemed in some way younger, fresher, than before; in that bloom from the practise of vice that is a paradox of life, even in the mothers of men; her strength more feminine, clinging; less resigned, and sorrowful as she never could have been. In such an estimate of her nature, so fortified, he could not down a sense of justification for having abandoned her. He could not speak;

yet, as he waited for her confession, he was curiously revolted by her stout legs in their red stockings, the baggy, in-bent knees, the rakish angle of the man's hat on the bulging mass of her back hair. She should have masqueraded well as a man; her sexlessness denied her even that.

"There's no good my telling every move," she recovered herself at last, blankly, and without lifting her eyes. "But you weren't right about my being made of better stuff — remember? — and going up in the world, free of you. I knew I couldn't. I've gone down."

"Wrong!" cried Gail bitterly. "I've always been wrong."

"First I crashed around a month in Seattle with Madge Arnold. But she wasn't the same as I thought she'd be. An awful tight-wad. Half her ideas were only a bluff. She hadn't the nerve to live them out — minded what people might think of her looseness — talked of her 'position.' . . ."

That woman's malign gospel for the West stirred in Gail's ears, above the roar of city multitudes. And he felt a grim satisfaction in how Lena's envy and adulation of her had crumbled.

"Mother had married again when I got back to Sacramento," continued Arlene. "I couldn't stomach the man — a parson. She's got two boys by him. Funny, isn't it, with me so wanting?" She paused. "Well, without money no woman stands a show keeping good down on the Coast."

Gail winced with a carking hate of self for the pitiable doom that his wilful hunger in life had so inevitably fostered; yet also with a faint scorn of her old fatalism.

"In San Francisco, before I finally gave 'way, I went

into a French Restaurant on Pacific Street one night. Mother'd been there, sight-seeing, and used to talk about it as a hell. That was one reason I went. Like me, wasn't it?" Her voice was hardening, with a slight mockery. She went on: "Madge was there with Perry Bleven. They had met through a friend of yours — a Mr. Merrill I think, though I never saw him — who was in the canning business, like her. That was the first I heard of you. So I knew your Martha's boy must have died if you were in Alaska."

Gail held his breath to detect any hint of her relish in that; but her tone kept its monotony.

"Madge took me back to Seattle, but we drifted apart after our last row. Then I began to read in the newspapers about your fight with the Lamar crowd, and they made you out a sort of hero. That set me to thinking of you a lot. And it was then my worst came. Not only in the Berlin and the Olympia. I went to places lower down that I used to pass when I did the mission work — that you must have known. That was part why they drew me. And father's bad memory in Seattle, instead of making me hate such a life there, got me curious and hankering toward it. The perversity, I guess, you used to blame me for. . . . I — I can't go on. . . ."

Gail groaned with self-disgust and humility, even though her sneers about him to Madge, her anger at his thirst for paternity, flashed through him vividly. The wreck he had made, so carelessly, wantonly, of her who once had his love! And meanwhile on Mt. Lincoln, with John Hartline and Clara, he had fought for, and all but won, the transcendent wisdom and glory of living. That was the tragedy!

"One day I met Bleven on First Avenue," she man-

aged to continue. "He was full of you, through Merrill, and this gold-strike of yours. I'd never told Perry I knew you. He isn't wise yet. He wanted me to come up here with him, as just what I am," she broke off, her fleshy cheeks colouring as he had never seen them. "I liked him, I like him still. I consented, but mainly for the chance of seeing you. I'd have traveled all over Alaska for that. Sometimes I thought you'd throw me down, and then I'd remember our years together — you alone in this fierce country. I couldn't believe you'd repudiate me, when we came to the point. And you haven't thrown me, Gail?" She raised her streaming eyes, wiped them with a grey bandanna. "But I never thought it could be so soon, or here. Still, life does things like this. It has to, or there'd be no justice anywhere. We'd hate or love it too much to keep on."

"It's I, who don't deserve to be forgiven," broke out Gail, overcome by her old, inexplicable steadfastness, her power of impersonally chilling feeling by analysis.

"Oh, I suppose it's just my sentiment," she conceded, "and that really I'm quite cold to you. Maybe morose, too."

Could Lena have become like Sydney? Surely her yearning for him must be febrile. And instantly the idea thrilled Gail: To redeem her, already so tempered from degradation — yet womanised and touched with remorse — by the stern, inspiriting ordeals of Nature and the winter trail. Her grim, worldly outlook, all her tolerance won from suffering, encouraged him to this. Only her malleability, under the dominance of Bleven as she had been ruled by Madge Arnold, warned him of failure, in that the man's brisk assurance might be hollow vanity.

For a time, with heads bowed, neither spoke.

"Lena, I *have* made the best of the chance you gave me," ventured Gail at length. "You've got to know, anyway. I've been living here nearly two years with Martha's sister — Clara. Hartline, not Harlow, was their real name. I think I've 'come back' in all honour and duty, as I swore I should."

Gail tried to speak casually, but his heart thumped with a specious exhilaration as he confessed, hiding instinctively his enshrined love for Clara. Arlene did not start, and when she slowly raised her head, he saw not the least glint of jealousy in her eyes.

"I suppose you've got — what you wanted?" she asked, more carelessly, quite unresentful.

"No . . ." he uttered, choking.

And then the eager, aggressive curiosity that he had withheld toward the pivotal matter of their meeting, which her sad avowals of the past had so obscured, mastered Gail, and he demanded:

"Aren't you divorced from me? For desertion?"

She did not answer. Her glance fell, and she stood there, rigid, repellent.

"You won't tell me? Why not?"

"I don't see what good anyone's knowing would do, if you and your Clara are so suited together. Especially on a trip like we're going on, all of us. And I did want to be near you."

"She ought to know — everything!" blazed out Gail. "She understands about you and Bleven already, as he does what I am to her."

"Oh, I shan't say anything to hurt your Clara," evaded Arlene wearily. "I guess we've both been through the fire with men. And as for Perry Bleven — he'll likely laugh when I tell him you and I've been married, as I suppose I must. But it's not in my con-

tract with him to know more about me, and he shan't, ever"

Gail stifled an imprecation. Had Lena only appeared to control her jealousy? Was her perversity, the moroseness that she admitted, keeping her silent? A twinge of desolation, of repugnance, seized Gail, as he reminded himself of her darker qualities, formerly accented by Madge, as now they would be by Bleven. He pondered Trueblood's words. Woman! The delectable yearning and source of all humankind; yet the despoilers of men's souls.

But he stood motionless, deep in aching thoughts, fighting a hot impulse to denounce her; and yet supine, flooded with vague fears for the weeks at hand, and dim hopes of succouring her.

"It's all up to the wilderness, I guess," he said calmly.

Arlene directed him a sullen, assenting nod.

Suddenly a wild, unformulable hope burned through Gail.

"The trail may decide how it will all work out," he blurted, "and in more ways than any of us can foresee. Perhaps it's to be the last test of what all our lives mean. And that would be right, after all."

Gail heard the scratch of new cloth as she started to walk up the shingle; felt the anomaly of her, even in the motion and sound of her legs rubbing together.

Lena had gone.

Chelthan was leading a string of the horses up from the corral, followed by cowed dogs and the triumphant youth of Chigmit. The tide was dead low. Surly oaths came across the flats. The *Alice's* boat was stuck in the mud, piled high with bales of hay, square boxes, large canvas sacks. Stencilled on them in vivid black

letters, Gail made out, "Bleven and Scannon." Scannon — then he was the lean, red old man with the white, shoe-brush hair, the fifth in the outfit.

Facing what seemed to be the final and greatest drama of his life, now at the beginning, Gail wondered: What of that dominating force outside my will, which has so aided me before? But it was only the divinity of the Self! What of that Nature, which had once appeared to guide ever to the good, but lately had failed? Was it not the Self, likewise, and no more? This was the key and truth of existence, won neither from mankind, the North, nor any of its heroes: that the creative, preying Self was supreme over Life and Nature, that he had always served it, and it alone — that he was bound to the omnipotence of Self forever.

Was its imperious aim in him never to be vindicated? Must he flounder unto the end, acting and judging fruitlessly between those poles of sympathy and murder?

Again the ecstatic solution dazed him.

He glanced up toward the store. In front of his door, Clara and Arlene were talking, and not as if mistrustful of one another.

Gail sighed and started toward them, casting a look into the cloudy sky. Between its woolly billows, the deep gaps of pale gold had closed. He rose above the darkening waste of moss and water. He heard a sifting sound in the dead leaves of the coarse weeds by the board-walk.

It had begun to snow.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HAPPY VALLEY

I

"I'M done arguing against a man so wilful as Bleven," said Gail, as they descended toward the timber. "He'd better learn his lesson now, than when we're nearer starving."

The bell on the sorrel mare hitched to the first sled jangled on over the left shoulder of Pete Scannon's checkered mackinaw.

"These cayuses never could shin that ice-bench, nor jump those crevasses on the back-trail," Gail went on. "The half rations has done for them."

Yesterday, the summit of that unforeseen glacier had seen the first desperate hours of their six weeks in the trailless winter waste. They had unharnessed the terrified, huddled horses, blinded by the ice-scud; beaten them, with nickering noses close to the crust, to leap crevasse after crevasse, hidden by treacherous grooves of snow. They had roped the sleds down the big ice-fall, and exhausted at its foot, been forced to camp on their loads, tentless, and with no fire except the spirit lamp to brew tea.

"Trapped in this valley, eh?" said the old man, genially as he could, after he had curbed the appalling qualm regarding any return that Gail aroused. "What was it Perry says to you this morning?"

"Just as always, 'You're the doctor,' and with that same grin." Gail spoke with uncomplaining scorn.

"Nags us into taking his route, and then puts it up to me when we're ditched."

"Well, oughtn't you to know our course, from the trip you claim to have took in here, when you staked your ground?" Pete charged. "Though that was in summer, when the country must 'a' looked all different," he added assuagingly.

Gail grunted, at the man's usual, straddling loyalty, between the nominal and jealous leadership of Bleven — to whom, as he said, he was so "obligated" — and Gail's underlying control of the party.

For a time their narrow, webbed snow-shoes crunched on in silence; weary, aching legs staggered loose-jointedly, and not wholly from the last two days' struggle, as they deceived themselves to think. The sun was but the pale core of a vague globe of light. Drifting flakes seemed to slide it forward with them, and though hardly after noon, it had not topped the Tordrillon Range, which they had just crossed. With the slant, wan gold of sunset, it now peered over some serene and rosy crest, now slipped behind a jagged and retreating spire, shrouding them in darkness. Gloomy spruces closed around. Scattered, slim, like hosts of sentinels, the short and evenly tapering branches bore great gobs of whiteness, grotesque caps, pendant sculptures. These, the deep softness underfoot, the fine, aimless drift from the open sky, muffled and at the same time accented the bells of the six teams. It was as if one had cotton in his ears, or moved forever through some cramped and padded room, which yet was the northern vast.

"A week or so more won't matter now, making it out of here," observed Scannon at length.

"It's the days we'll be counting soon. Bleven won't be able to bluff me then," asserted Gail. "We'll have

to loop the Terra-cotta Peaks, and hit down a stream that meets the Tsana," he hesitated and his voice fell, "near a canyon where I upset once. But we can make it — you and I and the women, anyhow."

"Thank God they're not onto how bad we may be in," said Pete with his simple cheer. "Perry's been the trump at boosting their spirits, and keeping dark about what grub's left."

"One of them is wise. His woman Arlene. Because I've told her," said Gail. "But Bleven don't know even about the horse-feed. That's what I've got to have out with him."

"Yes — her," conceded Scannon, unmindful of the threat. "But she's just like us."

Forward through the powdery haze they could discern Lena's large active figure in her red flannel *parka*. She was at the man's work of breaking trail, that prime ordeal and test of one's fitness to survive in the North; at which persistence in taking your turn becomes the measure of life, and in disaster the basis of judgment for succour and sacrifice. There sturdy, robust, she pressed down the yielding, unbroken blanket, lifting pounds at each step of her distended legs. Every day with leaden hips, her full angular features set, she had done so turn about with Gail and Scannon, but never Bleven. He would plunge forward only to initiate a change of course, or in the early, desolate dark of a grueling day begin to break fast and feverishly, in his conserved strength, until ready to collapse.

For a month Clara had "broken," more eagerly and swiftly than anyone. She had dropped out after a spell of giddiness in Nushak Pass. Recovering, she had not resumed the work. Bleven had forbidden it, in the early flush of his inevitable attraction to her. That she had

obeyed him surprised, more than annoyed, Gail. He knew that her steadfastness and trust in him still was unswerving. But lately she had become self-concentrated and contained, silent and oblivious to rebuffs and progress alike.

Gail was astounded; the change was portentous. Her buoyant stability seemed to be failing, her cheer and levity to have lapsed. He had been prepared for Lena's rugged endurance, but that Clara should weaken — she who had been so anxious to plunge haplessly into the wild, whose supple, steely strength, whose nerve and spirit in breasting any menace, was the heart of all his flagging hopes!

He would be haunted by her collapse in the scow on the Tsana, her daze and preoccupation in the cave.

It was all inexplicable.

II

Gail strode ahead to Arlene, and took his turn in the lead. Under her blue toque, her square face was unwontedly flushed, her narrow eyes wide-parted.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Happy Valley," he answered laconically, "I told him so," and heard the quick breath she drew.

Gail believed that he had ordered his relations with Lena rightly. He avoided arousing any morbid moroseness in her by questions upon their legal standing. What mattered that upon the trail? It had not seemed to stir Clara's curiosity. In her present state a revelation might be disastrous. And his one bond with Arlene was the frank comradeship of the open, such as he had had with his partners on the Yukon, feminine though she had become. And what women but these two could have so withstood this march!

"Good name, eh? — 'Happy,'" she repeated grimly. "The wrong pass and the wrong valley. Oh, I understand about you and Perry."

He caught her reading of how, tired of Bleven's discussions and assumed infallibility, Gail, avowedly uncertain of the land's lay under snow, had given in to turn east too soon over the Tordrillon Mountains.

"The wear of this trip has undermined us more than we show or'd like to admit," she went on, with the very thought then disturbing him. "Is Perry behind us?"

"Still in the rear. With Clara, I guess."

"Then the dog-team's hitched. And they're both riding," she said, adding with her native certainty in forecast, "That gives working fare to dogs tonight. And their salmon means life and death to us now. But I expected him dashing ahead here this noon, to set us an example on his shoes."

"I'm giving him his chance," said Gail, "tonight."

They mushed on. From behind came fitfully the leaden gurgle of the horses' cow-bells. They had not the crisp tinkling cheer like those of sleighs. They bleated, weak and mournful. Gail heard them in his dreams at night.

But at that moment he did not regret Bleven's blunder. It spurred Gail to regain his old grip on the life of the trail, the hard, inexorable decisiveness of action in the wilderness. Quick and clever at reading its ways, Bleven was arrogant, domineering, in following them. He belittled the strain of the march as if to defend his shirking from harness and axe, and imply that as the outfit's brains and money, his strength should be preserved. He boasted of "following the line of least resistance." He had profusely, then grudgingly, and

in the end only jocosely, recognised Gail's actual leadership.

His humour around the camp stove at night, chiefly at the expense of others, much concerned the business ventures of his father, a Bakersfield oil-promoter, whose handy man in their 'Frisco brokerage office Pete was—"Dead-O" Scannon, as he was known in the Sierras. They rallied one another upon their stock-booming schemes. Pete sarcastically accused Perry of generosity toward investors, of being a "socialist"—an affectation picked up at Leland Stanford. Perry swore that the blue powder-marks that pocked Dead-O's red face (got in a grizzly hunt, so he said) came from setting off fire-works at a hot-springs hotel to celebrate the acquittal of a Los Angeles grafter who had fled there.

But now in mid-November these sessions were long past. Remote and flavourless, they smacked of the *Seward* and Lamar. Gail saw that only his dependence on Bleven's capital, and a lack of seriousness in the pair's attitude, had kept him from disgust. They might even have broken the law; but Gail had divined in Bleven a dormant, honest instinct, attested in his high but hearty laugh.

They had their athletics in common, for Bleven had been a hurdler at college; and besides Gail's slant for chemistry was his knowledge of geology. His fleet imagination had grasped its essential time-mystery during wandering school days along King's River. But as with Snowden, the North denied any mention of such ties. Alone together, Bleven would worry about his health, complain of having put on flesh, and of a lack of "fibrene" in the beans and sour-dough bread. He scoffed at the idealism of his class-mate, Merril, but,

tongue in cheek, confessed being a socialist, since he wanted "all I can get out of this damned country." Yet something alert and human in him, infectious and irresponsible, belied any designed insincerity. He protested too much a disrespect for woman, and any deeper ends in life; in some equivocal, secretive way, he seemed to pride himself on treasuring a void within his heart.

Without the magic of Trueblood's birth in the land, he gained Gail's confidence less even than Dick had. Gail hinted once of his own ideas on the self's survival, through destruction and vitality; at which Bleven had sneered, "Rot! Sounds well, but she never works out," and named some German high-brow whom Gail had never heard of. But above all, Bleven would have sudden shifts from a stubborn, intolerant conceit, a flaming enthusiasm and hopefulness, to depths of self-accusation, despair and foreboding toward their venture, which the stress of travel had all ineffably increased.

At times Gail felt terribly alone with these chechakos. He itched for a companionship like Hartline's, bred and based in dependence upon the Youngest World. And at Bleven's worst — in his occasional outbreaks — Gail could summon in retrospect a greater sympathy for Blackwood, Sydney, or Lamar, than for either of these two new-comers. . . .

He looked up. The spruces cast tenuous, bluish shadows on the pallid snow. The flakes lagged straight down. The moon hung in the zenith, half a silvery wafer, parting the felty edges of sapphire cloud. From some great distance a barred owl hooted.

III

"This warmth can't last," said Gail to Lena. They had come to an open, edged by a few naked, rusty

spruces, burned in some Indian fire. "There's dry wood. It's camp."

The sleds jangled up. Pete with the axe set off to the timber, while Lena unharnessed with Gail, unloaded the tents, grub-box, dunnage, bedding, hay and oats. By the time he had trodden the snow, pitched the horse and dog shelter, apportioned their feed, Lena had raised the living tent, fitted the stove-pipe and was lighting a fire under the frozen beans and bread; but neither Bleven nor Clara had appeared. As Pete grunted outside with each blow of his axe in the wood knotted like iron, Gail unfolded the table, set the boxes for seats, spread the five sleeping bags on the big tarpaulin. Not until the tea was ready did they hear the creak of runners outside, low voices and the whimper of dogs.

"He's having the guts to bed them himself," said Lena of Perry, sliding a steaming platter on the table, where Gail and Pete had sat down.

The tent flap parted. Through the cloud of steam made by the cold, bowled in the fluffy, blue-grey lead-dog, Klika. She was a bitch, and sniffed up wolfishly at the table. Swinging her great curled tail, she careered about, slobbering hands and legs, and finally retreated to Clara's bed. Clara entered, her keen, potent face pinched and blotched with purple, against the white *parka* and hood that she had made of the ermine comforter at Chigmit. Without shedding them, and with set eyes that avoided Gail in particular, she threw herself on her bunk with a sigh. Klika crept close and licked her brow. She began to whisper and croon to the dog, as the others ate on in a silence that deepened suddenly.

They heard Bleven whistling cheerily outside; then in some querulous complaint to himself. He slipped

through the canvas, in his black lamb cap, embroidered moccasins, and duck-down coat, which all gave him a festive air.

"Bright as daylight out there," he announced briskly. "Thought we might have traveled late with this moon. Celebrating how we're across that damned divide."

"You know?" asked Lena, casually, seeing Gail's face darken for a more telling reply, "how this is the valley we've fought shy of all along?"

In the pause, Gail fixed his eyes on his plate, awaiting the man's tirade. But it did not come. Bleven doffed his duck-skins, perched himself on the seat opposite Gail, and heaped his plate with beans.

"Anyhow, we're over the range. And it's the right direction at last," he declared, unmoved in his self-confident optimism. "You ought to thank me for that, after all this jockeying with the compass for the last month."

He spoke at Gail, who coolly met his gaze and helped himself to milk.

"I suppose there's a way of 'getting round,' as usual," said Lena at the stove, bitterly using his customary, cock-sure phrase for avoiding every difficulty. No one bothered to tell about the Terra-cotta Range, and the tributary that entered the Tsana far below the eldorado.

"Look here," exclaimed Bleven suddenly, as if filled with a breathless revelation. "I've been counting our hay bales. We've only got five left!"

Lena shot Gail an appealing glance, and even Pete drained his tin cup disgustedly. Only five bales! As if the three of them had not been long living, dreaming, in dread of that slowly vanishing feed. And Bleven, who called himself their "head," had just discovered

it! But they not even betrayed impatience: they had learned the folly of stirring him by contempt. He gazed about in challenge for some comment, swamping his cup with sugar.

"So we got to be facing the time," drawled Gail, "when we get rid of our horses."

"That's it!" echoed Bleven. "What we counted on. And use the dogs. Sooner the better, I say. They're in great trim, went fine today. What have we got all that dried salmon for?"

"Then get your gun ready," threw in Gail.

"Gun? Not on your life! You don't catch me letting dumb beasts be shot in cold blood up in this country — poor creatures that we owe our lives to." His voice softened. "Old buck, and baldy, the two greys, and that rascally brown mare. They're as much human partners as any of us."

His greenish eyes gleamed restlessly. The flash of sentiment was for once sincere.

"Going to let them starve, then?" Gail asked, dryly, "are you?"

"They can rustle grass through the snow till spring, the same as on our western ranges," Bleven retorted. "You only want to kill them because it's the custom of this country. Gods! Give the poor, suffering brutes their chance for life."

Dead-O took a brisk, adjudicating bite on his tobacco plug.

"Yes, the other side of the range they might rustle and live," reasoned Gail with a slow seriousness. "But not here, exposed to these Pacific snows. They come too deep. Horses 'ud stand no chance getting through them away from wolves and wolverine. That's why there's no game in these valleys, and we're in so bad

for crossing over." He paused, knotting his up-sloping eyebrows. "It's a question of fact, Bleven, of our seeing and feeling ahead. But I suppose that to watch them drop clean from bullets, once and for all, is more harrowing to a man like you, than to *know* when we're miles away how the poor beasts must be helplessly fighting, stalled to their ears in these drifts, with a pack of wolves at their throats —" the words throbbed with mockery, in his deeper feeling and the fulness of his conviction in the law of the trail, "than to see their struggles and blood, hear their pitiful cries in your sleep."

"Hell!" broke out Bleven, and hid a scarlet face in his cup. Gail cut furiously across the piece of bacon on his plate, as Lena stifled an exclamation. Only Clara, sipping her tea and caressing the bluish bitch in a corner, sat numb to Gail's grewsome images.

"Prospectors say a man's hoodooed, I've heard," said Pete, rising to chuck a log in the stove, "to turn horses loose here in the winter."

"As if we weren't that already," muttered Bleven, lapsing into the gloom of his rare surrenders to any issue. "Oh, have your own way. Why not chuck the hay away, and plunk them tomorrow?" he sneered, hesitating, "You're the sort of man that wouldn't hold off from eating human flesh, if it came to the rub."

"No, I wouldn't," Gail blurted, aroused. "If the body'd died naturally. And I'd make others with me eat it, too. The dead is dead. The first thing a man owes to himself and life — *is* life," he broke off with flashing eyes.

Bleven cast him a narrow look of loathing. Pete checked a wild laugh. Gail's forced bravado toward so universal an abhorrence had lashed even Lena into a

wincing silence, and he saw how he had outraged the thin bond of self-control and mutual cheer that alone walled them all from tragedy.

"I'm sorry, but I meant it," said Gail, calming himself, overwhelmed with shame. He searched their faces for resentment, but seeing none, continued, "And your still standing for me gives me the courage to say what I've been screwing myself up to all day." He threw back his head. "It's this: If we keep on, as we must, making our regular caches for the return, then we've got to start in on half rations tomorrow, ourselves."

Bleven started, glared at him, and in the dead silence once more dipped three spoonfuls from the sugar sack for his tea.

"That's why, for one thing," went on Gail, pointing to him, but sure of his support in the sugar question from the three others. "Bleven, you're what they call a 'sugar-hog' on the trail. It's natural enough here, though like a disease with some, I know. But our sugar's more than half gone. And we're leaving all the rest of it here, I'm telling you."

"Not on your life!" he cried, leaping to his feet with smooth cheeks paling, hardened eyes darting uncertainly from one to another. "I won't be cheated out of my nourishment. We don't get enough calories from the grub now, and I'm almost a skeleton. You think I'm going to eat only what you give out?"

Pete shrank from him, and Clara shuddered. Their gaze, veering dependently to Gail, thrilled him with a quiet confidence.

"You can eat or not, but it will be no more than what I give you," Gail said, leaning forward and steadily eyeing Perry. "And anyone seen with what's not in

his ration — gets this!" He rested a hand on the automatic revolver in his belt.

"Damn you!" shouted Bleven, fiercely, grinding his teeth.

He stood there, staring, rigid and braced, in the humid atmosphere of the tent, with its odour of boiled beans and the Siwash-like smell of unwashed clothing — the shock of black hair mussed over his high, clean forehead — his thin, short lips drawn tight, the dimples scars. Then gradually he began to tremble, and the large vein in his forehead swelled and throbbed as though it would burst.

And it was Clara who broke the piteous stillness, by dropping her cup with a clatter; but Pete was the first to speak.

"That's enough of him for me," he breathed out, relaxing, "no matter what I owe him. Thain, I'm with you from now on," he took the final leap from his tottering allegiance. "A man that'll throw away his horses' grub, want them tortured — and then kick about his stomach."

"Dead-O!" beseeched Bleven in trepidation.

"He's only not himself," said Gail. "We're not either, all of us."

"Boys, it's only that I'm afraid — for your sakes — of myself," Bleven declared huskily, with a breaking voice, and sank into his seat with bowed head.

The silence seemed to have stretched into an eternity before the two women gathered their senses. Lena's lip began to curl, over the steaming kettle of dog-rice that she was cooking. But Clara appeared to be most aroused by this climax. She threw Klika from her lap, took off her wet socks, and plunging an arm into her dunnage bag, drew out a dry pair and put them on.

Then, shrewdly eyeing Perry askance, she picked up the first pair and threw them over the rope on which garments were drying that Pete had stretched above the stove. She stepped into her moccasins, took the rice-pot from the stove, and disappeared with it through the tent flap, followed by her bitch, to feed the dogs.

Gail stared after her. Was this an awakening from her long daze, a dawning of her resilient resource, under the shocks of the scene?

But the others appeared oblivious of her move, as they had always been of her uncanny demoralisation.

Pete filled the dish-pan with clean snow from under the tent wall, and placed it on the stove. Arlene collected the dishes, and when the water was hot began to wash and wipe them. Clara stole in as she finished. Pete sought his sleeping-bag, taking off only his moccasins; the women did likewise, but also shaking down their hair. Bleven had not lifted his head from the table; and only when Gail doused the lantern and turned in, did he get up and follow softly to bed.

It was growing colder. The rising wind, pouring in from all sides upon them, like a river released from far away, bent and tore the surrounding spruces. Now and then snow tossed from them sifted like steel dust on the canvas roof; and Gail, lying sleepless, watched an icicle slowly eat down from the stove-hole, parallel with the pipe and the box of fermenting sour dough that hung close to it for warmth.

Suddenly a low whistle rose from Clara's sleeping-bag. "Here Klika, Klika, Klika," she called in a sleepy, wailing voice, "give the mothers a sliver of salmon. . . ."

Gail started, muttering her name. And an answer

came, as if she had first spoken in her sleep, but now lay fully conscious:

"So we're gone wrong and may starve, eh? I've been blind. Tonight's shown me a lot, thank heaven! Gail, don't ask what's been ailing me. I can't — can't tell you. Only keep the faith, believe in me as I have in you. And there's nothing between me and Bleven. I can take care of myself, better now than ever."

"Sh! You'll wake him," whispered Gail, beside himself with mingled joy and apprehension. "He's after — mad for — you. Who wouldn't be? And you're leading him on."

"No! I'm only trying to make a man of him. Bring him and Lena together, to begin life again in our world, like we have. That can't harm us, it's the sympathy we've vaunted. Only bear with me." Her voice died drowsily. "More than ever I love you now."

His heart filled and bounded at the sacred word. For the instant Clara was herself again, as in their first months at Chigmit. . . .

Gail heard her steady breathing chime in with the stertorous tremour from their partners, none of whom had been aroused.

He sank back. His cup was full tonight!

IV

Ghostly moonlight out of scudding clouds alternately bathed and darkened the tent walls, with pulsing shifts as of bright hope and black despair. From the horse tent he heard the revolving munch of jaws, whines of the dream-weary wolf-dogs.

But Gail lay wakeful, triumphant, full at last on his mettle, through Clara's avowal, and this mastery of Bleven. He had re-won his grasp upon the life of the

wilderness. Though they were on the wrong course — five living atoms gulfed in a life-mocking vast — they would make the trip, all of them.

His mind ran backward. The goad of travel had effaced all show of affection between any of them, cooled even their hot dreams of gold. A helpful solicitude at performing camp tasks in common had followed the exuberance of starting from Chigmit. This subsiding, there had come to the fore repellent traits, small perversities, which each had controlled after an explosion or two — toward one for shirking, another for wasting milk or bacon-rind; until they had traveled repressed and self-dependent, awed by the grimness of their quest, the best and worst in all hidden, well in hand. What fellowship grew sprang from such cover, and so far had revealed itself only individually, furtively, in a quiet tolerance, in dumb respect and admiration for small self-denials.

But the future. Did not their several passions still lie latent, smouldering the more vigorously for this concealment — whether sordid and bodily, for riches, or his own creative lust? Would they not be intensified, gather power like a dammed torrent, in the grind of the trail; to be unleashed by its ever-galling of ego upon ego, so that fists might answer a trivial word, the honest lie, the strong cave in, the brave be cowards? Yes! But as often then whoever nagged would forbear, the selfish immolate themselves. All thirsts, the petty and transcendent alike, would draw into the same focus. To judge each justly was the task — the charge of his manhood and proof of leadership — in curbing any quarrel, whether it involved his own perpetuity and a woman's honour, or only the madness of fatigue and hunger. And though he himself might rave, beset by

either crisis (death always lurked on the shoulder here, starvation in the throat), Gail felt that the destiny of these beings in the tent rested in his hands, and he thrilled to the responsibility.

In his hands; but tonight his larger faith lay in the North—in the Youngest World, and in omnipotent Nature, guiding ever to the good. She had baffled him before, but had not she then been but making his trial? And never, except in defeat, had he been driven to glorify the Self. At moments of victory he had responded to man, to the multitude, or woman. And was that not a proof of Bob Snowden's creed to be selfish when you must, kindly when you can? Thus he had been by turns valorous and acquiescent, which had so stirred Trueblood. (Dick as by instinct dimly saw this truth and key to life, by which all men must gain their guerdons. Would that some day he might win his, in this wisdom of charity and hardness!)

Gail's thoughts ran on. How the realities of living cheated hopes and fears alike! But Nature and the vast cleared the brain, gave wings to aspiration, though in the face of suffering and impending death. How the relentless trail confuted issues which before starting had seemed must be vital, and thrust forward the unforeseen. For example: Bleven's sly, stubborn bullying had obscured in Gail his aim to regenerate Arlene. Meanwhile that problem had solved itself, through the land's potency. Lena was the ideal trail-mate, staunch and restrained, showing none of her darker qualities, the woman for the land—impersonal Nature incarnate, perhaps. Not once had she been abject or partisan to Bleven, coloured by his intolerances, complaining or discontented. And though in the past she had never been pliable to Gail, and he felt that he had gained

now the force to rule her, he hesitated to do so. For long the thought, dead though it was tonight, had haunted him, aroused by Clara's vagaries: Himself and Arlene together in the end, where they had started two years ago, wrecked by existence.

Never! That could not be the North's solution, the reward of the Youngest World, their verdict, in the wisdom that inscrutable Nature had given him, for so doggedly clinging to his dreams. . . . Poor Lena! Whatever her regeneration, she nurtured no spark of unending life; she really was at war with Nature, whose ends — as the final arbiter of life and death, above "right" and "wrong" — so distant and brooding, yet were ever logical and just.

Life as Nature proclaimed it — naked and indestructible — was the all in all Gail yearned for. That was his greater, final goal, summed by all his thirsts and Clara's; by Love, whether veiled in her indomitable passion, or the flower of his creative instinct. It was Life, the magic of the spheres. . . .

He lay calm and wakeful, into the icy glow of dawn.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BLUE BITCH

I

THEY did not kill their horses the next day. After a dumb breakfast, as Gail was hitching up while Lena and Pete loaded the sleds, Bleven, subdued and haggard, came to them and sat on the folded tents.

"All right then about your half rations," he said. "But how long d'you think these bales'll last?"

Condescension coloured his submissiveness, and a note of truculence his hint about the animals.

"Till we hit the stream in this valley, where it's quiet enough to freeze," replied Gail, ducking for a trace. "That ought to be in a week or less. Likely the ice'll be swept clear of snow, and we can make fast time with the dogs. But it's all a guess how far the Tsana is on this course of yours."

Dead-O spat confirmingly, and it was decided to shoot the cayuses when the outfit could travel through the Terra-cottas on the tributary.

"So riding behind the dogs, now —" began Lena, with an invoking look at Gail.

"No more of that, on your life!" spoke up Pete, fixing his eyes on Clara. Relapsed again into her daze, she stood among her lithe, erect-eared pets, gnawing a sliver of raw bacon as she gazed into the pale violet sky, stilled by the sudden cold and yet ungilded by the sun.

Bleven swung his back upon them; rose, and walking

to the drift in which they had stuck their snowshoes upright, fuddled with his thongs. Gail and Scannon, to make the cache for the return, lopped the limbs from a spruce; hung beans, flour, bacon, the rest of the sugar in its top. Then, twisting on their webbed shoes, they resumed the march in the order of the day before. Instantly each breathed a white rime upon the fur collar of his *parka*. The horses, ever wrapped in moist clouds, became caparisoned with glistening needles.

They struck down among a horde of symmetrical, steep terraces, and reached the river that afternoon, under heavens all dark azure upon the horizon, but a dusky pink above. It was a raging glacial torrent, and ten days passed before the chaotic rim-ice locked across the steaming vein of water, or smothered its immense, ice-hummocked boulders.

II

In that time, struggling up and down sheer scarps, through the snow-choked willows of slues, half rations and the blighting cold incessantly thinned the armour of their will and self-restraint. The cords of each face stood out, distorted, under its bronze snow-burn which the frost no longer crimsoned, but now blotched with pallid spots, as if the skin were peeling. The irritation at trivialities of person and habit, that the fight across the Tordrillons had eclipsed, reharassed them acutely. Halting to chew their frozen bread and beans at noon, tottering stiff-legged and aching to pitch camp at night, they succumbed to dejected, spiritless silences.

After Bleven's bursts of speed ahead, when he fell back quickly tuckered (in the way of athletes not dazzled by competition), Pete would taunt him for lack of nerve, and break the loyalty of partnership by telling

Gail how Perry had "welched" on hikes in the Sierras. Dead-O's gorging his jaw with tobacco, spitting at meals, set Lena's teeth on edge; it worried her foresight that the man's dry equanimity would lapse when his plugs gave out. And he was more outraged than anyone at Clara's eating much of her ration uncooked, and throwing away bread crusts. Thus, while Pete had been the most balanced and self-contained in the outfit, Clara, whose aberrations should have quite unnerved her, escaped any visible impatience, but laid the hardest, sinister burden on them to bear with her — all proving to Gail how the trail at its bitterest makes a paradox of life.

Likewise, Bleven seemed insensitive to minor annoyances. Yet his smaller ways chiefly taxed Gail's forbearance: taking an hour to dress, eternally changing his socks and moccasins. He kept his dunnage bag, which was twice as big and heavy as any other, strapped outside the bald-face's load, and would halt the train to shift his black lamb cap for the red toque. In the tent, with head and arms plunged into its depths, he packed and unpacked, folded and refolded his duffle — among it an inflatable rubber jacket to wear in fording glacier streams, which Gail, looking on with locked jaws, conceived that he spitefully treasured for its very uselessness. It would prey on Gail that such extra weight was a drag on their progress, slowly was spelling disaster. Through his desolate hours with the teams, he would plot means of "losing" the bag; narrate to himself a detailed and vindictive story of Bleven's discovering the loss, of his anger, and the dramatic gun-play.

But Gail best controlled himself in the larger issues, which all centred upon the grub; and toward it Bleven

skirted closest to the breaking point. For a week after the sugar had been cached, he made a show of refusing to drink any tea. Gail stocked the grub-box for the day after breakfast every morning, and had detailed Lena, as cook, to divide the bread and bacon, fill the cups at meals. With all staring avidly at her, a protesting murmur seldom failed to escape Dead-O, or even the mute-eyed Clara. Gail read in their set and glittering pupils the lurking suspicion that Arlene ate on the sly, which indeed her manner of aloofness then confirmed. Bleven scanned her venomously, his thin lips twitching, as if he were counting the beans on each plate. Gail would shudder with inklings of the bestial thoughts that rise under the thrall of hunger, which he felt were surging through the poor man's brain. Bleven seemed ever battling for the elusive best in him, at the verge of some inhuman, flaring charge. And yet he made none as the unstable days succeeded. Gail counted them, one by one, as steadying his own dominance, and came to think that he saw through his own disordered thoughts the glimmering light of an achievement in governing men so desperate.

III

The Terra-cotta Peaks had long nicked the horizon, a diadem of ochre pinnacles, all but clear of snow, against the diaphanous blue of the rigid winter sky.

Not having the dogs hitched, Clara traveled less with Bleven, who continued now petulant, now blatant. And he seemed soon to evince a cunning toward her. He made a mystery of their association, pretended to a hidden intimacy, and was openly solicitous about her health and dress. Yet she responded to him no more than formerly. Thus Gail divined that Bleven, hav-

ing finally failed to assert his mastery of the outfit, was in his roundabout, insidious way, by vengefully arousing Gail's jealousy, seeking a flank attack.

This struck Gail forcibly while behind the teams late one afternoon, as they were crossing a tundra of nigger-heads deep in an amphitheatre of opalescent peaks. At once the stream of his grotesque fancies seized upon and worried the misgiving. He imaged the long-pent passions of them all astir, sensed a fateful outcome tragic and violent beyond any surmise, shattering his grip on himself and these trail-mates, parodying his wisdom of the wild.

Just ahead, the creak of runners and sound of bells on the sled drawn by the grey gelding ceased. It had come to a stop in a dense thicket of alders. Gail peered through them. Low voices caught his ear. Lena and Bleven, crouching under the horse, were tightening its britching. . . . With the whole party in the tent, between those repressed silences imposed by the wear of personalities and work-a-day details, little more than commonplaces now passed anyone's lips. Only with two alone did speech ever dare the truth, or could be gauged the depth of valour, sincerity, or hallucination. And since such times alone cast a searching vision into life, Gail sharpened his ears, guiltlessly.

He started, a-tingle, at Lena's answering question:

"So you want to know what I was, or am, to Gail Thain? That can't make any odds to you, who boasts he's got no conscience in anything."

Her tone was coloured by the scorn that, capping the couple's slow alienation, had finally expressed itself on the night after crossing the Tordrillon pass.

"It doesn't. I don't give a hoot, and don't want a

conscience, or to care for anyone." Yet in Bleven's bravado there lurked a faltering.

"Well, before we quit I'm going to make you care," the woman retorted strongly, "and about me, Perry, as I have for you — but only since this hike began. Then I'll make a clean breast, but meanwhile I'm mum to everyone. D'you think I'd give myself away while you're making this play to his Clara? I like you more than it's ever been in my nature to favour anyone before," she flashed, resentfully, and Gail winced at this echo of her old self. "Oh, I could tell you things — and about this Clara."

Gail bristled with a hot bewilderment. So the two women shared confidences. Often seeing them together, he had long suspected that. But the sled, jangling on again, drowned the dialogue, so that Gail, briskly creeping up invisible behind the load, only heard Bleven say,

"I know I'm not the ace for the trail that I pretend to be. But Thain's the last man I'd admit it to."

"It's no more use your hiding that from him than to think you've got a show with Clara. She and Gail — that pair!" Lena sighed with a direct, astounding admiration. "They're folks to look up to. Bucking this winter trail has taught me a lot of respect for things I used to scoff at, and they set the pace. I wish you'd only see things with their eyes, too."

"That's the line of talk his Clara gives me," cynically put in Bleven, shamelessly, "every time I tell her how she's hipped me."

Gail's heart had at once leaped and blackened; the first at this proof of his beloved's effort to redeem the man, the second in that Clara was alert with others while ever glum and obsessed toward himself. He curbed the mad impulse to confront and accuse Bleven.

"What drove me to her, started you and me drifting apart," Bleven charged, continuing, "was the slant you had for Thain at first."

"That's all over. Gail was something to me once. I only started to win him again," confessed the woman. "It was half in sentiment, half in a jealousy of Clara I found I could hide. There used to be something secretive, underhand in me — part of my callous nature. But I told you how Alaska's given me new eyes toward everything, like I want you to have."

Ever and again, this earnest of the uplifting majesty in the Youngest World!

"It's changed Gail, too," she went on. "I never used to give him credit for his wild ideas. But there's more than sense, a terrible truth, in some of them." She paused suddenly. "Clara's the finest woman I've ever known. She has her doubts and troubles, worse than any man could suspect. I've promised — I'd most give my life — to help her."

Again wonder and the gnaw of misdoubts, for all the trust and reticence which Clara had urged on that first night in the valley, flooded Gail's bosom. For a while neither voice ahead sounded. Above the tinny monotony of the horsebells, he heard the metal ring in the stock of Bleven's 30-30 rifle clink now and then.

"Let me tell you why I used to be so hateful," spoke up Lena soon. "And it was Clara showed me how wrong I was from the very bottom."

She broke off so abruptly that Gail leaned to one side of the sled to see them. Lena was muttering into Bleven's ear. Why? They were unaware of Gail's presence. Once Bleven started back impatiently on his always out-bent knees. He turned his side-face, and Gail withdrew disdainfully at sight of the man's

thin lips and low-set dimples set tight with a sardonic grin. Finally —

"Ha!" Bleven gaped aloud. "If I thought you weren't kidding me!"

"But there can be love besides," she exclaimed, unheeding, "even though the body is unfit."

But Bleven had broken into a resounding, raucous guffaw.

"I tell you it's no laughing matter about me," she cried, stridently. "Take that . . . and that. . . ."

Gail heard the impact of a mittened fist. A dash of snow powder spurted above the sled load, and he saw Bleven running forward from her, as if he were just regaining his feet.

Lena had struck at him.

They two had reached that boundary between the trivial and the vital, the bestial and the ideal, laughter and tragedy. Always a hair divided triumph from oblivion. To keep one's head, only to keep one's head!

Angry at his tolerance, that as their leader he had not curbed them, Gail started ahead after Bleven. He guessed that the unheard depth of Lena's secret might be contrition for her barrenness; and he hated Bleven for his slur. At length Gail found him with the lead team. Fagged from the dash at breaking trail, Bleven was leaning panting on his rifle, and at sight of Gail protested in a strained, guilty tone,

"Think I'm played out, do you? You try breaking through these hummocks yourself."

A pitiful look on his drawn, ever rather contemptuous features calmed Gail, as he heard him murmur, "Lena was right, too. . . ."

"Look here, Bleven. You got to quit talking to

these women, both of them, like you do. And keep off clean from Clara."

(Everyone else in the outfit called him "Perry," as he had requested in his elation on leaving salt water, but by some obscure impulse Gail had not.)

"That's up to her, I estimate," Bleven retorted, but cowedly. "You don't understand your woman. She's got too nice a streak for you."

The taunt failed, his voice was so tremulous. And for one who had so scorned and derided womankind, his words amazed and appeased Gail into silence.

"A man wants something he can hang to in this country," Perry all at once broke out. "No matter how he talks, you've got to own a living being to look up to," he mumbled with the excited incoherence lately typical of him.

That ache entrenched in his heart by a sordid life, bared at last and by the North! Thus the land requited even this blustering, weak, conceited man with the transfiguring might of all human aspiration.

"Well, won't you own one, if you keep your contract with Arlene?" quietly voiced Gail. "To say nothing of love, if you ever felt it."

Lena in the end with Bleven, made a man. That was the hope!

"So your Clara tells me. But love!" he snorted, and threw back, with an overbearing belligerence, "You leave Lena alone. She's the one that's mine."

His frankness held Gail from contempt; and thus the harping upon Clara flicked him upon the raw. But Gail strove to quench his anger by reviewing that her confessed interest in Bleven avowedly but kept their pact to reclaim him.

"I warned you." Gail gritted his teeth, slapping

the holster at his waist. "Don't you sneer me into winging you."

"Hell! Can't I shoot, too?" And Bleven rattled the ring on his rifle butt.

Their gaze met, but the threat was as shallow as the fire in Perry's greenish eyes. His vanity of leadership broken in their first clash, the fight in him was defensive purely. Yet always the gruelling ordeal of the trail, the stress of controlling these maundering partners, made Gail less sure of himself, and thinned the wall between the evanescent and the profound, made the equilibrium of life ever less stable in the heightened and deluding surge of his introspections.

"You don't mean that, Perry," (thus for the first time, instinctively) averred Gail. "If you don't like how I'm running this outfit, you can back-trail any day you're a-mind to."

"O-ho! You talk of quitting, eh?" cut in Bleven, satirically. "You, no one else, has squealed. A man that hollers so on a trip like this accuses himself of anything. He'd be the one that's been pilfering from the grub-box nights."

At last, the expected charges of treachery. The prime thought shook Gail that, since he was certain that Bleven would be the first to "lay down" and steal at a crisis, the man was deceivingly preparing his rôle for that, bluffing to cover his tracks to the food.

"We haven't missed any grub," said Gail, with a strange solemnity.

The other gave a hollow laugh. "No, *you* haven't."

"You meant me, then," cried Gail, breathless, whipping his hand again to the automatic. "Eat that lie!"

But Bleven's wild stare wilted. And Gail had expected him to fly off the handle!

"Damn!" he evaded, huskily. "I suppose there's others besides you. But we'll never get out of this. And the devil with gold!"

He stumbled clumsily over a nigger-head, and disgust swept Gail. "It's the man who first smells smoke that makes it," muttered he.

Bleven seemed not to hear, and soon was dropping, slinking, backward toward Lena. Clara in her ermine *parka* came into view, the blue bitch Klika close at her heels. Always the two were together. She had circled the outfit from behind, slavishly breaking trail after the foraging dog, who seemed to move heavily and labour-edly through the hummocks, her pointed ears back and fluffy tail drooping.

His thoughts concentrated upon Clara. A desire seized him to join and question her on the worry about which she had pleaded silence. But the wish weakened, with a sense of some tie between her and the dog. Their unswerving allegiance mingled in him distress and hopefulness. And whenever Gail was with Clara the blue animal's furtive devotion imposed a dumbness more timid than even her derangement should warrant. But if her mind was clouded, her energies waning, she maintained her endurance and a grewsome physical toughness, insensitive to any hardship, neither hungry nor complaining in her miraculous stamina.

No! Clara's loyalty had been but steeled. Both her and everyone, the portentous North chastened and indurated for its beneficent ends.

"Got a whang-leather?" suddenly Pete's bass voice came from the bald-face's sled. "Heaven help us if the dog-traces is as rotten as our harnesses." And Gail turned back to help him lash a torn girth, as the other teams tinkled onward. "The dog gear's rot-

tener, if Perry bought it." Recently a peevish habit of borrowing trouble had corrupted his canny, just, good-nature. As they started once more, he said with a hushed unction,

"Recollect last night that end o' bacon? How I says to Lena, to try her sort of, 'Ain't a dog's meal, is it? Jest right to stick in the beans?' Made her think I'd put it there, so we shouldn't miss it."

Wheezing, he awaited an answer, but Gail only shook his head.

"Well, when you come to give out the grub this morning, that chunk was gone. And no dog could ha' got it, because the sack where 'twas stowed wa'n't chewed into."

"You told Bleven?" Gail frowned.

"The hell, no! It's him I suspect. This is jest to tell you I ain't any longer watching the women I used to — particular she that nags me about spitting."

"Arlene?"

"You've said it. But the's others."

Gail felt a fury overtaking him. With a sickening, ominous thrill, he was about to blurt an inane plea for Clara in her unhinged state, when Pete added, "Look yonder. There she is with the dog and *him*. Watch that bitch, Gail. She'll be the death of us yet." As he pointed, his voice had sunk to a hoarse whisper. But he caught himself with, "I'm layin' behind to tend the brown mare's sore wither," and was gone.

Through the thinning spruces bordering the river, Gail saw three silhouettes in the pale gloaming: Bleven, Clara, with the blue Klika between them. Dazed, he could not restrain himself from creeping up on them, until he heard Bleven's high voice, a-quiver with feeling —

"I know I ain't fit yet. But, Clara, I'm blind crazy for you."

And through the thunder in his ears, he thought that he caught her adventurous laugh. But certainly:

"Perry, if you knew the truth, you'd hate me," came Clara's answer, clear and distinct. "Is that how you treat my friendliness? For your own good, be a man! . . . Wait — foolish boy."

A red mist streaked across Gail's vision. The dreadful, excruciating pause pressed his burning vitals into his boots. He held the automatic pistol in his hand, cocked and pointed, steady.

Bleven was repeating her name — beseeching. Gail caught the word, "Love," and was mad. . . .

The thin wall against Death! The tottering balance of existence! . . . *His* proof of manhood, of mastery over the Self, *now*.

"It's not honest love — you've given that to Lena," Clara cried fiercely. "You beast! . . . Look — look! That cloud —" she stopped dead in her tracks, her voice breaking with the bewilderment he knew. "Like a whale's fin. It's hung there — just so — for days. . . ."

The weighted wrist fell limp. Gail found himself shuddering, drenched with sweat. The bitch began to whimper. Bleven veered onward, aside, into the dark timber.

Gail caught her in his arms. She yielded, speechless, still pointing into the white spaces on high. And yonder, over alders opening into wider reaches, between velvety, unreal hills, they beheld the filmy layers of a flat, iridescent nimbus, shaped like the dorsal of some gigantic ocean mammal. . . . A cloud! In the moment all his hot thirsts and loathing, equally with

the paltry routine of camp and mushing, drew into the remoteness of that faint and icy mist. And so also, to the throbbing of Clara's heart, vanished this canker of his jealousy toward the intriguing Bleven. Thus all emotion, delirious, petty, soul-pervading, might lose contrast and perspective. . . . Must this keep on, until defeat, or victory through his beloved?

They were emerging into new regions. Birches covered the strange hills, in a red-brown fuzz, and their fretted branches caught the southern glow in tiny, silver-yellow veins. Soon Gail missed the elusive, drumming undertone of the river through its broken ice. Across the luminous snow, folding away into clear distances, in a sort of dead incandescence like a floor of pale metal cooling, he discerned the reaches of the river, frozen solid straight to the ruddy spires of the Terracottas.

Tomorrow, to travel with the dogs! The thick gulping of the bells began to clang out the horses' knell.

IV

A shrill whistle from Dead-O; then, "My Gawd, bring cartridges enough!" shouted with a drawling effort at casualness, shivered the limp tent walls, to signal that the beasts were ready in their last corral.

Pete had volunteered to build it, during a funereal breakfast. Lena had offered to assist him but he roughly repudiated any help. Gail had purposely stayed in the tent, apprehending an eruption from Perry. They heard the crunch of the old man's snowshoes, as he wound a rope around the three trees picked close by for the slaughter; but Bleven, deep in his dunnage bag, pretended an unconcern, while Clara sat on

her bedding, staring vacantly at the dough-box over the stove.

It was eight o'clock as they issued outside, and one star still swam over the tinsel sickle of the moon. First Gail, then Bleven, Clara, Lena, they ranged themselves in line along the tent, avoiding one another's glances. Behind, slept the dusky expanse of the river; before, over the dead and greenish snow, the timber thickened against a bossed cliff of porphyry. The three spruces of the corral made a triangle, its base, hardly ten yards long, fronting them and not thirty away. The horses stood with their heads at this barrier of a half-dozen rope strands — the sorrel, buckskin, baldy, the two greys and the mischievous brown mare, who alone, with neck arched and trembling, spasmodically ringing her bell, betrayed any foreboding of doom. Starved and with sunken withers, their bones stood out sharp and gaunt; the ever-humid rime steamed on the shaggy, unkempt coats. It had pencilled the horizontal ovals of their eyes with thick crusts of whiteness, which gave them the fantastic look of wearing carnival masks. Occasionally in the tense wait a head dipped to the snow, delicately rooted a snaky track on its surface, licking up a last, useless drink.

"Dead-O! Cut off their bells," suddenly came Bleven's cracked voice, "or I shan't stand it when they break against the sides."

Pete had appeared with an arm uplifted from behind the left-hand tree, his bristling white hair hatless, a sheepish stare on his pocked face, now like parchment under its bluish pits. Still panting from excitement and the work, he drew his knife in acquiescence. Lena strode forward to aid him, but after three paces sank

back wilted against the tent. Clara caught her breath as each bell plopped underfoot.

Gail raised Bleven's rifle, as Dead-O joined them. He fired first at the sorrel, aiming between the eyes. Instantly the air was choked with flying snow, and it was a moment before he saw that the creature had fallen clean. The others, kicking in a mad stampede, charged against the ropes with the blind and frenzied terror of horses in the presence of their dead. The dogs broke into instinctive wails and yelps in their tent, but above all throbbed the piteous whinnies of the brown mare.

Gail shot again — at the bald-face. He also fell; and once more the sickening turmoil, the white haze. Out of it swam scarlet patches. The remaining four stumbled over and trod upon the bodies, callous and reckless in their vain, all-blotting fight for life. Now and then sounded the sharp thud of hoofs striking a buried bell. But most unseating to Gail's mind was Lena, whom he would have taken oath would face the execution without wincing. She was weeping bitterly; and Bleven, whom he had expected to collapse, had his green eyes bulging, his lower jaw protruded, and was breathing out and upward through a round aperture in his lips, as if seized by some fierce, sadistic thirst.

The dark grey, dappled mare surrendered next. She cowered in the right-hand corner. Gail felt that but for the clownish rings about her eyes he would have flinched at their heart-rending, abject appeal. His arm quivered as he levelled the gun. . . . He had only shot through her neck. With her brother gelding, she charged against a rear side of the corral. It sagged with a ripping noise, but the desperate animals were innocent of making a concerted breach. Gail laid her

low in the angle by the rear tree, and drew a bead upon her grey mate — but ineffectually.

Clara had lunged forward with a shriek, seized the rifle from his hands, and fired at the gelding. He fell. Gail had found himself trying to wrest the weapon from her, shouting to Pete for help. Then, lurching into the tent, she yielded it to him; and starting about as he recovered himself, Gail saw Dead-O leaning forward, sick on the snow.

Only the brown mare and the buckskin remained. The first had leaped the broken ropes, and was ploughing wildly toward the rock wall. She was stalled as safely as in a summer mud-hole, so Gail picked off old buck, crouching to jump and follow. Then —

“Get her! Git her!” yelled Bleven, striking to grab the gun from him. But Gail dodged, and fired at the mare. Death cut her last cry abruptly, like a final, querulous interrogation. All was over, in seven shots from the magazine.

The silence that tore Gail’s bosom was broken only by Pete’s retching, and the relentless ululation of the hidden dogs. Acrid smoke filled his nostrils, the reports still stunned on his ears; the forest, the prone corpses with their straight, stiff legs swam in his sight. Lena had bound a red bandanna across her eyes, and was groping for the tent door like one blind. But Bleven stood beside him, rigid, staring with mouth open, spell-bound and unsatiated.

A pinkish light flushed the snow. The deep blue sky, filled with long coils and cues of immobile, felty clouds, brightened in flaming gold upon their edges. Suddenly the cliff behind the ragged ropes, over the mute chaos of trampled whiteness, the frost-stayed springs of blood, began to glow. The immature light slanted among the

spruces in shattered rays like silver quills of ice. The rocks there shone as with some soft, inner light such as grows magically in a fairy pantomime when a scene dawns behind some filmy veil.

Gail caught a keen, stifling, horsey smell. It nauseated him. He grasped that once after some like tragedy — so long ago he could not remember where or when — he had wanted to eat horse flesh. He recalled his outburst to Bleven about dead humans; then, numbed by the leveling inconsequence of all zests lately, weak or consuming, once their source was dimmed, his thoughts poured into blankness, and he shouted to break camp.

v

The slaughter detached the past like some clean-cutting sword; and with it, Gail's faith in the inspiring North, as stirred by Lena's reclamation, her uplifting of Bleven and his gleams of an honest guilelessness. Apathy and a renewed sense of failure cast Gail into the vain resource of exalting the Self again. Yet he knew that a new vigour and optimism might as haplessly seize them all again. For on the smooth river, the fit and willing dogs flattered each with the assurance of covering big distances.

Bleven, always subdued now, showed a plaintive note in his moroseness. Cowed at her rebuff, he avoided Clara; and she, although separated all day from Klika, who led the six dogs of the larger sled, seemed to be no more unbalanced. But Bleven's insinuation and Pete's charge about grub-stealing ceaselessly haunted Gail. Still, watch the food sacks as he did, and constantly check up their contents, he found no trace of theft.

At first all hands competed to drive the dogs. Then Perry or Pete (a silent tolerance of Bleven had suc-

ceeded Scannon's open fealty to Gail), were generally at the gee-pole. They swung around air-holes, which steamed like seething cauldrons, where cracks bounded through the shaky ice-fields in a slithering thunder. The sled ground across bare gravel bars, bumped over rough rim-ice, breaking through into dry caverns. With Bleven running backward in the van, calling "Mush on — Sam, Prince, Shaggy, Klika, Jumbo!" and Dead-O, as wheelman, holding the plough-like handles, they tackled hummocks and steep sidebanks; and at loading after upsets, the dogs tried to slip their collars, and sat whimpering as they chewed the snow-balls packed in their feet. Gail ahead with Clara beat down any high floe edges with the axe; Lena would lift the forerunners over these, as the restive, wolfish creatures snapped half in play at her hands, and she echoed, "Come on puppy, puppy!" At night in the tent, they braced sinuous bodies, scratching their paws furiously on some rock with growls of relief, to thaw them out. And whoever meted each his one dried salmon, poured out the steaming heaps of rice, stood alert to quell their ravenous raids on one another's grub, the wrinkling of upper lips from great eye-teeth, as they flashed in swift, flesh-tearing, yowling fights.

Yet the virus of fatigue never ceased to undermine their masters' bodies; the struggle of will against the pangs of hunger to demoralise, while seeming insidiously to drug, their minds. After a numbing day, Bleven would swear that they had come twenty miles: a vivid joy seize all. But Gail, bursting from the tent, would call that the peak where they were camped was the same one visible close to their last halt — and return in a dumb ferment. They had lost sense of time and distance.

By turns dulled and over-acute, Gail sought a refuge in external form and colour. That sensitiveness to them, first awakened on Mt. Lincoln, re-possessed him. He found himself more than ever deluded that he was a tangible part of the wild extravagance of winter hues. Ever motionless in one quarter of the sky, lay the same pale clouds, brick-red or orange, like silky fuzz spun against depths of emerald which darkened as one gazed there. The day stretched momentless between the instant that the sun peered over the peaks at eleven in the morning, and vanished into the same wall behind at two. It never shone upon rock or tree; but overlaid their stark and pearly surfaces with a rosiness itself a pigment; then with blazing gold, in transparent, sheeting armour, which accented detail and shadow as with a volatile, refracting liquid, into light so cold as to be fiery. The orb loomed, a huge vermilion lamp set on some hill, before a shield of lacquered brass. Down in the river gloom, open water across the tongues of bends showed in misty spires of greenish and lemon-coloured threads; and as the air-hole came nearer, these were dyed crimson and azure, like the fusing salts of some strange metal, beneath black and silken rapids that eddied fiercely but in silence. Anon in the twilight of three o'clock, the world turned ashen. Yet streaks of radiance, in phantom delicate cymars, lingered to drape the upper spruces. The clouds wore into thinner shreds. The snow, like some translucent feld-spar, exhaled a dead and pallid scarlet into the darkling vault of stars.

A deeper, more searching exasperation replaced Gail's pique at Bleven's idiosyncrasies. Gail resented that this type of the West's aimless, selfish plunderer should reap the wealth from his eldorado. Gail credited him with a baleful cupidity, foresaw the empire of the North owned

and polluted by the childless, sensual spawn of an Hocherda. For here Nature imposed no heroic menaces, as on Mt. Lincoln; they had no barriers, giddy and unsurmountable, to assault; no spurring end in glory, brotherhood, and revelation: naught but the cold, monotony, and hunger — the press of yearnings, passionate and lurking, every hour nakeder in the gathering shadow of starvation.

Gail would review the tales he had heard or read of similiar adventures. How empty was the reality, ironical the truth! In any story, Pete would have given a relief in comedy and their hunger visit them with dreams of banquets, pathetic memories of homes. Nothing of the sort occurred. Gail would think: Why am I here? Who are these people? Pioneers, indeed, and not the best of them; beside the dry-farmers, futile, avaricious, false — yet not the worst. But was he himself not of them? No matter how the land had since re-made him, had he not entered this realm in ignominy, far less worthy than they? Still, at each day's survival, he had a flash of his old transport on reaching a victorious crisis, of having trodden spheres beneath him; and on quitting camp, of setting out into the fortuity beyond an enacted issue, with a confidence won neither from the land, any person or multitude, but from his own lonely being. Never did his old uncertainty of self depress him. He marvelled that he ever could have been a slave to such misdoubt.

Above, folded the Terra-cottas. Only the strip of sunless sky, between shivered, rusty pinnacles; below, the dusky river. It dipped and zigzagged around sharp bends; a sudden falling hinted of the Tsana canyon. It throbbed and muttered loudly under the muffling ice, and by the first week in December began to "flood."

One night they were driven thus to camp early. All day they had continually circled the traps of overflows, as the water, so deadly in that cold, was caught on the surface by settling areas, and spread across its thin snow like some dark and furtive cloud.

After supper, they lay quiet in their bags, breathing fitfully, too weary to sleep. Each had turned in in his day moccasins, the women without undoing their hair. The bean-pot hissed on the dull cherry cube of the stove. They covered their noses with bedding, to exclude the tantalising fumes. From her post closest the stove, Lena now and then dipped a cup into the water-bucket, and sitting upright, poured it upon the beans, stilled their bubbling.

Waking suddenly, Gail grasped that he had dozed. The others had fallen off to sleep, without extinguishing the lantern. Hours must have passed, for the oil was out and the wick burning. On reaching to turn it down, Gail realised that he had been aroused by a movement of the tent wall, although the night was windless. He rose and saw that the fire was dead. He cast his eyes over the mounds of the sleeping-bags, each with a cap of frost about its aperture. The moon was full again, and the tent sides gleamed as if under a stage spotlight.

The kettle of beans was gone from the stove. Gail's breath left him. And a sleeping-bag in the middle of the tent was flat and empty. Confused by the glare, he leaped to the assumption that it was Bleven's.

Bleven! — who had as good as accused him. To throw dust in his eyes — hide the villainy fated for one like him! Gail felt the hair stiffen along his temples, and ground his jaws in anger. He thrilled murderously to the man's trick. Bleven had taken the

grub outside for a midnight orgy. One could not measure how much the beans would swell in cooking; he could get a square meal, and in the morning avoid suspicion of how many had disappeared.

Gail thrust the automatic into his belt, crept from his bed. In the open, he was blinded for an instant by the splendour of the night. The forest was drenched as with quicksilver; the strip of sky was so black it smothered the stars, which pierced it slowly in sapphire splashes. Along the ruffled cliffs vague mists welled sable and a velvety green. And not until Gail had been staring a while at the other tent did he see the disc of a candle in its faint yellow stain upon the canvas. He stole forward, inwardly swearing at the steely, membranous sound of his moccasins on the crisp snow.

He lifted the flap. With the sight which met him, his galloping heart stood still, first with astonishment, finally in a wild perplexity.

He beheld — not Bleven — but Arlene!

He descried the furry ring of dogs, heads up, ears forward, somnolent-eyed, as if just aroused. Lena was kneeling in their centre. Her back to Gail, she held the enameled pot tipped over, but was not eating from it. The candle, melted to a stone close by, showed the cords of her gaunt hand that grasped the big spoon. It was ladeling the half-cooked beans out on the snow. The blue bitch Klika was softly wolfing them with an avid hunger, her large body trembling. But with the food under their very noses, the other half-starved beasts did not whimper in jealousy or emulation. They only gazed on fixedly, as if awed by some dumb, brutish solidarity inherent in the heritage of their wild breed.

Gail crouched aghast and powerless. Although he

had been ready to kill wantonly, his fingers eased from the trigger of the revolver. It stung him for an instant that Arlene, hearing his approach, had started as a bluff to feed the animal; but the woman's intentness, the dogs' restraint, their attitude as if at some expected, customary performance, all denied that. So she, after all, had given Klika the chunk of bacon missed by Dead-O. And then, with his ever haunting sense of Clara's affection for the dog, Gail recollected out of the haze of the past weeks, that Lena had hinted at sharing some secret with Clara. Lena had promised to help her. But why thus? And there was Dead-O's warning about Klika.

Was it a charity of some sort that Arlene was showing? A charity that of itself menaced their survival! And yet this idea began to smother his wrath. In their present desperation, the loss of a few beans could hardly matter.

Gail dropped the flap. He stole back to the tent, into his bag, and slept until morning without hearing Lena return.

The granite-ware kettle was back on the stove. No one remarked the loss of any beans, or lifted accusing glances from them. At worst, she was not guilty of the trail's blackest infamy: Lena had not stolen for herself, but to fortify the chief dog of the team upon which deliverance rested. Gail was even about to dismiss his discovery as an illusion of exhaustion or a dream, when at breakfast both the women refused to eat their share out of the pot.

They harnessed, took the trail, and the furious day, on which the river again and again flooded, obliterated these worries, and once Gail found himself laughing a little wildly at them. Pete was caught in an overflow

that soaked his moccasins. Careless of the danger, he traveled till noon without changing them. Then Gail beat his bare and twisted feet, rubbed on snow; yet the man did not wince with pain, as he should have done were the blood returning, but kept on resolute and smiling. Gail saw the flagging, active dogs distorted, their bodies now magnified, now dwindling. Or he heard an elusive, ghoulisn echo of the horses' bells. Snatches of tunes, fragments of forgotten rhymes, filled his heart in a wearing iteration. He heard Bleven whining that the fumes from their frying bacon robbed his frost-bitten nose of feeling. And that night Lena cried in her sleep that she had found the badges of scurvy on her arms. All heard this, slack, uncaring, acquiescent.

The next day, purple rings circled Scannon's insensate ankles, and he limped.

VI

Without knowing it, they travelled less and less every march. From dawn to twilight encompassed years. Skeleton peaks ringed them—blood-flushed beings, slowly growing atrophied. One felt older than the stars.

The tributary narrowed toward a box canyon, which Gail recklessly assumed was part of that coveted formation on the Tsana. At the waterhole of camp one night, Dead-O pointed to an animal's spoor in the light snow that had been falling all day. The tracks were larger than those of a wolf or lynx, smaller than a bear's, yet not unlike them.

"Wolverine! The *carcajou*," exclaimed Gail. Indeed, had not shadows passed on the moon-glazed walls of the tent last night?

"Moving on our back-trail," said Pete. "Scenting old buck's and baldy's carcasses. We ought to string up our grub tonight."

But they took no such precaution; and Gail, dispelling a fretful sleep toward morning, heard a hesitant crunching, scratching sound outside the tent. The wall next to Clara's body began to belly inward. He caught a half sniff, half sneeze.

"It's them — our friends," whispered Pete, as if he had been awake, listening. Their appalled glances met. "Don't wake the girls."

Bleven lurched upright in his marmot-skin bag. "Oh, whistle to them. Here, doggy, doggy," he broke into a high sing-song, but stared at the ice-hung stove-hole, inertly.

"Gimme his gun," breathed Dead-O.

Gail had grasped the automatic, but too late. Before Pete could draw the rifle on the bulging canvas, a squirming mass hurled against the wall. It ripped and parted, as if an avalanche from the mountain had struck the tent, a force impalpable and yet irresistible; an out-coiling of gigantic metallic springs — warm, animal, acrid. Twin black heads, wolfish and catlike, twirled at the centre.

The revolver was knocked from Gail's hand, and for an instant he felt that he was fighting, fists bare, the blinding night and withering cold. Not a voice, not a cry; and then the lightning assault of sinewy, taut limbs. He smelt fetid breath, the sour odor of fur. A flash of yellow-white teeth shot through the turmoil; of crooked and tearing claws, burning, blood-shot eyes. He heard outraged snarls and a venomous, throaty gurgling. Pete, who had so collapsed at the horse-killing, was wielding the rifle-stock; the once blood-thirsty

Bleven defended himself, whining hysterically, using the cover torn from the grub-box as a shield. Lena slashed with the axe. Gail saw Clara fall upon and seize the automatic.

Its report rang out, but only lashed the fury of the beasts. Gail knew nothing except his rage to dig fingers into their quivering flesh, to tear and blunt and kill the pulpy cords of nerve and muscle. He was aware of slimy lips, the excessive heat within upright groins. He was the engine — puny, delirious — of so superlative a brutality, that any processes of mind had been ripped as cleanly from all control as his physical reflexes. He was fighting for the Self — omnipotent!

A dark, hairy paw tore across his forehead. He felt a fleshy ripping, but no pain. Then the rifle-butt in Pete's hands chugged and bludgeoned between him and the wolverine's ultimate frenzy. Next, an easeful blankness. . . .

He awoke and staggered upright, as a tide of yelps closed around them. Other, friendly, woolly forms wriggled between their legs. The dogs had broken from their tent and joined the battle. A writhing mound of bodies whipped up the howling tumult, bowled against the stove. There was a lurid spray of embers — terrified, defeated howls — and the two fiends bolted, scuttling off into the up-river darkness, the dogs stampeding after.

"If I'd a-had jest one small chaw of tobacco," cackled Pete, "I'd 'a' croaked that customer for ye."

"Dead-O!" blurted Gail, his eyes swimming with worship.

They glared, panting and speechless, upon the chaos strewn under the shredded, sagging tent: torn dunnage and tarpaulins, grub, dishes, ashes, gore, and flat-

tened stove-pipe. Lena with an oath hurled down the axe. Clara, her hair streaming, her white jersey split up the back and splashed with crimson, broke into a falsetto laughter. Bleven had sunk on his moaning face. Pete collapsed with a gasp beside him, his left cheek and neck bleeding. Gail felt a tepid trickling down his forehead, and touched the soggy gash there.

Dizzily, he and Lena stamped out the coals unquenched by the snow, gathered the food from the wreck, propped up the tent. Wan day was looming. Far away sounded the elated cries of the dogs, at last returning. Close by a faint wail responded, from the only one which had not entered the fray.

"Klika!" cried Clara, shouldering toward her through the tattered tent flap.

As Lena lighted the stove, Gail peered out at the homing animals bounding back in triumph, tails circling, tongues hanging sideways. Blood smeared them all; tufts of their rumpled fur had been torn out. Some limped on three legs, and the white Prince held up a drooping paw.

"Bless the dumb creatures!" breathed Pete, hearing them. "We'd 'a' been corpses but for them."

Bleven stumbled, snivelling, to his feet. Gail turned back into the tent.

"Two side o' bacon gone," said Pete. "And half that sack o' flour—the next to our last. Be'n all ground into the snow. The tent's no use now, either."

VII

Gail was traveling alone behind the team, over a frozen slue back from the river. Bleven was driving, Lena and Clara breaking trail ahead. The blood kept pouring, freezing, so that Gail knocked scar-

let slush from the wound along his scalp. He bound it, tearing a strip from his *parka*. He clenched his fists, struggling against the life-sapping darkness that was closing in upon his brain.

Of a sudden the dogs stopped in a clump of willows. Gail surmised that they were tugging the sled out of a chuck-hole. But at a call from Bleven, the women turned back to help him, and Pete, who was limping in front of Gail, spurred on to join them.

An ominous sense of disaster filled Gail. Weak and tottering, he started to plunge across the intervening distance — about forty yards — when Clara, running to join the others, faced him. Her countenance was blanched, but her voice clear and strong, as she shouted, waving her arms in warning:

“Keep away, Gail! I — your Clara — say this ain’t for you to see yet.”

He halted, sank into the snow, ravished by an unbridled alarm. But immediately this fear subsided, either by an instinct of obedience to his beloved, or in a flood of fatigue at this rare chance to rest. Perhaps four were enough for the job; they had seen him bleeding badly; he would aid them when summoned. He lay on the shining crust watching the quartette huddled, hushed, by the animals, who sat braced tensely over some unseen action, quite as on the night when he had detected Lena. All fed an immense rising column of vapour, and presently he could only think: “The cold — the cold. How the tiniest atom of life spouts a geyser of steam. Surely it’s never been so cold.” Yet he felt it only as a faint hardening of the moist hairs inside his nostrils.

After a while he heard Clara speaking quietly, as if fully aroused in all her lost sanity. She was giving

orders in her old vibrant, compelling tones. It was the Clara of months gone. And then the foreboding silence, which had grown somehow expectant, delectable, was shattered by a howl. It began in pain, but died away in relief and jubilation.

Klika's voice. Gail's heart stood still. The other dogs took up the sound in a weird, exultant, deafening chant.

Arlene was on her feet again. Gail arose, staggered forward a-flame.

"Who's hurt?" he yelled, gaping at the clamour. "What's up?"

He saw the stirring bodies of the team, their switching, brushy tails and clean teeth.

"Klika!" shouted Lena. "She's had a litter of pups here!"

Gail reeled, but caught his balance.

He beheld Clara rise, lift four furry objects, one by one, into her soft white parka, holding it out like an apron. She pressed onward and vanished among the bright-stemmed willows. Gail thought that he heard her laughing, shouting with joy. . . .

From her direction, seemed to spread a light, dissolving the clouds from his mind. But instantly a heavy shadow darkened it, like a fog. He thrust down his legs, running, but a power like the invisible wind of dreams buffeted him from reaching his partners. The white world danced dark, cadaverous, unreal as to a sleep-walker.

At last he had breasted that gusty gap, and was standing with Lena, Bleven, and Pete, among the dogs. The beasts were quiet now, their sad and mournful, trusting eyes fixed on a red stain in the trampled snow. Klika stood braced and quivering, whimpering in glad

little explosions, although her tail drooped. As Lena held her from dashing after Clara, the dog slobbered at her knees. The two men leveled a drawn, piteous glance at Gail, began hitching up the sled, and Gail imagined that he helped them to harness the happy bitch.

They were off again, going swiftly. Klika pulled so hard and impatiently in the lead that Gail kept up with difficulty.

He heard Pete and Perry talking, but at first could not make out their words. They enunciated between pauses, as with great effort, and their tones were low and flat. But soon:

"Every wolf noddle of 'em seemed to understand — eh?" said Pete awedly. "Poor young critters that has got to die. My heart more 'n hurts for Klika."

"Got as much right as we to live," rasped Bleven. "And no more chance. Why did Clara beat it on with them?"

"Wants to fondle them alone," cut in Lena. "You — you men can't understand. But if they do die, I won't answer for her. Watch out."

The stillness drummed upon Gail's ears. Then, from Perry —

"Thain's all in. You saw him fight those wolverine?" But compassion, admiration, filled his voice. "A king, he is."

"He'd wore himself out before, fer us," stuttered Pete. "'Round everywhere, doing everything. And we ain't hit that canyon yet."

Gail thrilled weakly, in a warming gratitude, to this mirage of a long-yearned-for brotherhood. With death in each throat, the benignant North was astir again in their behalf!

In a solemn hush, they emerged upon the river. Its middle was streaked by a thread of sodden snow, the mingled overflow of days. Steep, jet-like walls thrust outward, a mouth of darkness. Clara came into view, still running, with arms outstretched over the burden in her *parka*. The ice bent to the right, around a smooth cliff, into which the steaming vein of seepage ran. There open water fed an airy fountain of mists, towering in elusive curves. Clara skirted it, swinging to the right; but the dogs, Bleven being unable to keep abreast of them, and goaded by the excited Klika, held a straight course.

They plunged into the swirling air-hole, to an agonised chorus from human throats.

Gail found himself with Perry at the sled. It hung balanced, slanting over the current, one runner caught in a ruff of ice. They saw the foam churned up by the helpless, bedraggled brutes, a-struggle in sputtering yowls, ever more feebly. Off slid the top of the loose load. The sled toppled, started after. Bleven lunged and held it; then Pete and Lena, violently panting. The rotten traces parted. Sled and grub were safe.

Clara, ever clinging to the whelps, was dashing ahead along the edge of ice, calling Klika's name. She was following the freed mass of dogs, so rampantly alive a moment back, now inert, dancing down the vaporous mill-race.

"That bitch," maundered Lena, at the brink. "You suppose she knew her pups must die when we do? I think she drowned herself a-purpose. I've heard about animals doing that."

Then a tide like night, strangely scintillant, yet palliative, descended through Gail's head.

He fell limp and leaden to the ice.

VIII

He was lying in his sleeping-bag, alone on the sled, deep in the translucent night of the canyon. Across dark, polished ice flickered liquidly the first gleams of a camp-fire. He saw blurs stirring there, under a brow of rock.

"The trail decides. All's over now," he tried to enunciate, appalled at his resignation. "Works it out -- right. . . . Right!"

He knew that his lips were moving, but he could not hear the words they formed. His febrile mind raced on.

He fought to realise the nadir of his despair, to re-grasp the sinking entity of himself. . . . Was he not dying?

The Self! What else existed? Any guiding force, inherently uplifting, could not be outside him. It was within — his soul — the Great Will of Existence . . . doomed! Nature and all other life were a mockery, an anarchy, traitors to themselves. Life was war. And there were no rules of conflict, no creeds of conquest; no meed for heroism, suffering, self-sacrifice — neither from Man, nor Nature, nor the Multitude. Alike, all their brooding ends lay in barrenness. Perpetuation was a hapless taunt, alluring, flaunted, tragic, unjust. Obliteration was the one immortality — failure the ever-ineffable bondage of the spheres. . . .

Thus the last die seemed cast. There swept through him forgotten visions, hot with gold, love, and unending life — wraiths of faith and victory by charity and vengeance. Quenched, every spark! All his valiant dreams, the strife, and wisdom, the ache of his soul, the

glory of the North, of this predestinate Youngest World! . . .

"Clara!" he cried in anguish. "Clara!"

Beside him, he had caught sight of her ermine, rolled into a gleaming ball. It filled him with shame and a self-abomination. He reviled himself. Had he forgotten, in his delirium, facing the Apocalypse, *her* — the supernal lodestar?

A warmth penetrated him from the *parka*. It stirred. He thought that he heard a gentle whining in there. The little whelps! He gathered the bundle into his embrace.

Then twin, tawny eyes floated above him — Clara's — deep and distant as the remote scarf of stars. Her oval features were livid, tremulous. She was raising his body.

"Drink. You've lost blood," her voice throbbed bravely. "Keep the stiff lip, Gail."

He heard, without understanding; but he put his mouth to the cup of hot flour and water that she held to it.

"Klika's pups," he articulated, raving. "And not dead yet."

She appeared to laugh, but he hardly heard.

"I suppose they must die, Gail," she said in a grave tone. "But I won't — we shan't. . . . We've won — the future. . . ."

He neither heard nor understood her note of triumph. Yet she saw his steady breathing, and compressing her twitching bloodless lips, smilingly went on:

"I got Klika and myself mixed. That's in the madness keeps a woman guessing till she's sure. And I never was sure, till her things came this afternoon. That broke the spell of my delusions. Klika — I saw

her condition long ago, like a kind of mirror to my craving, a bond between us. I had the hunch that if she had them, I'd make good. And I shall. . . . But I hadn't the nerve to tell you till I was certain. You'd staked your soul and life on me, bucking this last trail. We'd come to success or failure — you and I — the parting of the ways. Knowing you, Gail, for me to have built your hopes, and then have to choke them, might have finished for the whole outfit. I couldn't cheat you with promises if they weren't true."

She stammered, and her voice kept breaking. But she did not prick his lethargy — or was it that her revelation overwhelmed him? He only stared at her with glassy pupils, as she added, in a blaze of her old, resistless fervour —

"But they are true, Gail. . . . Klika was — like me now. . . .

"I tried to keep my secret, but Lena read it in me. You should have seen her rise to the divineness. I told her I had the crazy notion that feeding the dog would help nourish me. So she stole for Klika, risked her life. . . . There's a woman!"

Gail moved convulsively, like a waking cataleptic. His strength was returning, but he did not yet perceive her unquenchable fealty to creative life, her grim, devious, suppressed tenacity for his transcendent guerdon: the reality of that ecstatic vision on Chigmit beach, of those primordial, cosmic functions that she was destined to fulfil.

But he grew aware of other figures surrounding them, of Lena, Bleven, Pete, all their faces set with a radiant, glorifying reverence.

"Hel-lo! — What?" he moaned.

The world still lay far beneath him, inchoate, abys-

mal. Yet, slowly regaining it, he felt a lust for life — Life the fecund and indestructible.

His arm groped forward, seizing Clara's hand.

"Can't — can't you understand her?" tremulously whispered Perry, the once craven Bleven.

"Reckon I'd better reense his scalp again?" said Dead-O, gently.

"Oh — oh — I'm all right," Gail averred, distinctly.

"Gail, I'm going to dig down," chuckled Clara, "if death doesn't catch us before he comes. Down for moss to pack him in, and carry him on my back — all-same-Siwash."

She leaned and kissed him upon his high, gaunt cheek-bones, his crinkling lips. He beheld Perry's eyes wet and sparkling, an arm drawn about Arlene, who hid her head. And then the three were gazing on him with that brave tenderness which had been his on the peak with Bob, in the cave with Clara.

At last the verity, slowly permeating his lapsed senses, had pierced him. He folded Clara to his body, felt her full tissues tighten, maternally, against his bosom.

"Just God!" cried Gail into the night.

CHAPTER XX

ARTHUR

I

EACH new camp was in sight of the last one. They staggered forward in an atony of speech, and thought, and will; nervelessly facing dissolution on the white rack of the trail, sustained by the flickering, deceitful yet imperishable instinct of self-preservation; turn about at hauling the lightened sled, mechanically pitching, folding their shreds of canvas, dividing listlessly the remaining scraps of grub. For exhaustion and the annihilating cold had dimmed their minds toward the turgid drama of effacement, which loomed remote, as if seen through a concaved lense — and yet no more distant than Clara's victorious apocalypse.

For the first day thereafter, they had plugged ahead, enleagued by the divine call of parenthood, bound in a valorous fraternity. But at dark the tiny whelps had died. Clara stole out alone in the night and buried their mere excrescent tissue. Morning visited a fool's paradise; through the spectre of his elation, Gail stared at oblivion beckoning them across the wastes. Clara had shriveled with sadness at the poor dogs' drowning; but, as they kept their aimless course, she ever and anon broke into memories, distorted yet trenchant, of their early days together — on the *Seward*, at *Torlina*. Unaware of it herself, the old candour and rail-lery tempered her accents. And just as Bleven now stuck close to Lena, so Clara seldom left Gail, who, still

weak from his collapse and the wound, remained dumb. Clara replaced him in the tireless, goading initiative of camp work. Pete dragged himself on desperately, with senseless limbs, far in the rear.

Except at instants of an illusive and uncanny keenness, Gail even began to doubt the accuracy of his understanding on that triumphant night. His clarity of mind was dulled, even in the raw certainty of having won his personal eternity only that all must be blotted out. And his partners were less acute. Bleven complained no more of his frozen nose, although he often voiced, with a moan of self-pity, some delusion of seeing snow-shoe tracks, which yet aroused in the five no sense of solidarity. Dead-O no longer hankered for a quid, and accepting the mastery of fate, sealed his lips from anticipating evil. Arlene with her scurvy left half her small ration uneaten, forced it upon Perry. Gail had once seen Clara holding the white *parka* before her, as if under the hallucination that she still was carrying the pups. And his own feverish introspections evinced no fret toward creeds of living, Nature, or the shroud-like glamour of the Youngest World. It only clung perversely in his mind that his damning defect, ushering him to death, was that he had never hated any man; that however militant or superhuman had been his strivings, they held no rancour, scorn, or destructiveness toward the unfit and the weak.

Already the Self was lifeless.

Thus Gail lived a waking dream, unreal and yet not incoherent. It engrossed him, painlessly. Believing that the dead man must be dead eternally, he was indifferent to the details of its ending. His love of life was summed, his supineness stirred, by no more than a vacant dread of that inevitable moment — as a Change.

In them all, vitality had sunk below the line of courage for theft or violence. They had passed the crest of hunger: three days of that gnawing torture beyond words, which the fourth obliterates. You forget and do not care. *You* are the sleepy, flat-bellied incubus himself — Starvation. . . . They had left: no tea, about six pounds alike of flour and dog-rice. Each morning they drank a gruel of the first, with thong-ends, whang-leathers, strands of gut from their torn shoes; at night boiled a cup of rice in the bean-pot, with old bacon rinds. Their *parkas* were in rags, undergarments disintegrating; the fur of caps scorched from leaning over fires; and the gunny-sacking which swathed their outworn moccasins trailed fringes that tripped them. Every face, sunken and mummy-thin, was at once a leprous white and a hectic garnet hue, in the decay from frostbite, and scaled over by smoke and the dark scurf of snow-burn. The sockets, mercifully swollen around their dim yet lambent eyes, made them unrecognisable by feature to one another. The women could hardly speak through their puffed lips — Lena's raw from her cankered gums. Olive lines spread from Bleven's nose across his cheeks. Matter from the healing wound on Gail's forehead smarted in his eyes.

They did not know where they were, nor the direction of their heading. They had emerged from the canyon into some high place of shapeless twisted hills, abrupt scarps; a chameleon land, incessantly disturbed by mirage and a leaden fog; a region of persistent night, with moments of unending dawns, interminable sunsets. They breathed the thin air of the moon beneath a sky of pallid brass which always had just ceased resounding in Gail's ears; in light that was chased and crinkled upon the vagrant ridges as a sheeting of vermilion foil,

till suddenly, on the low crotch of a summit, a gleam like a live coal burst into a flaming torch — the sun!

II

It was probably near Christmas. Neither canyon nor river were in sight. Gail had an impression that he had argued with Bleven over back-trailing; of having come out upon the Tsana from some giddy height, which Clara had shrunk from descending. Bleven had been on his knees. Gail wondered whether he had struck him there; then remembered that the man often crawled so, sometimes breaking trail, but always mumbling that he was finding human traces.

He had been doing that all today. Gail was pulling a fragment of the sled, and for hours a rhyme had spun through his head, articulated by dazed voices:

Let me feel maggots crawling through the sod,
Or else — Let me be God!

Once Clara had echoed Perry with a mumble that she smelt wood-smoke. It was noon; but the sun, a globe of smothered orange, had not burned through the haze which yearned up the slopes in veils of a filmy turquoise.

All at once Arlene, who had refused to eat on breaking camp, collapsed forward a second time.

"I'm — played out, too," groaned Bleven, tottering beside her. "And thirsty, parched . . . this fever from my nose . . . petrified, not a jelly now — eh, Gail? . . . Let's lay over tomorrow, unless we see more tracks. Cook up all our grub for a square feed. Hadn't you sooner end it in the tent — on a full stomach . . . what say?"

Unwavering, monotonously — without reverence, or fear, or bravery — he welcomed the good fellow, Death.

. . . Friend, too, of Gail's whirling brain. . . . Pete staggered up, in time to grin sheepishly at his meek assent.

"No grub-b," broke in Lena, in a half gag, half laugh. "Eat—in this scurvy? I c-can't swallow," she ended in a bitter, dry cacophany.

At a distance, Clara was leaning on Bleven's rifle, as she gazed searchingly about. Gail hallooed to her to return to the sled and help make camp. But, whether she had heard Bleven's surrender, or the observation was involuntary, she called as she approached—

"Any wood's too far."

"Ain't that unkind?" whined Perry. "But what's to hinder us chopping up the sled. Won't need her any more. Burn the tent, too."

Pete gaped in protest, but only opened his mouth soundlessly, like a suffocating fish.

Gail and Clara unrolled the tattered canvas, propped it on their snow-shoes, inserted the tent-pole a-slant beneath. The others spread their sleeping-bags, and instantly crawled into them, without touching the stove and sled, which they had left outside.

Gail ducked under the flap to get them. As he returned, with the axe also, a faint stuttering from Pete and Arlene showed them already asleep. But the sight that riveted him was Clara.

Grasped in both her hands was the big spoon from the empty bean-pot. She had torn up the rotten tarpaulin, and was digging down wildly, avidly heaving her shoulders, muttering, through the floor of snow.

"Crazy—the squirrels at her, too," croaked Bleven, breaking into a withered chuckle, which Gail found himself impotently joining.

"Moss, moss," whispered the breathless woman. "To stow and carry your little shaver in. . . ."

The twilight seethed black before Gail's eyes. He tried to formulate the ghostly self-accusation of how far more ruthless and persistent was the furtive, humble instinct of creation in woman, than its once-heightened counterpart in him, a man. But his mad groping only melted into the resigned syllables:

"Let's sleep — like the others. . . . Fire in the morning."

And next he and Clara, side by side, were shoulder-down into their sheep-skin bags.

The cloth walls loomed out phosphorescent in the moonless night. They tinged with silver, into a fretted web; edges of the rents burned in gold — at last a pallor. No one arose or spoke. Bleven tossed, crackling with the fever of his blood-poisoning. Occasionally a groan broke Arlene's muteness. Once Pete had sobbed. . . . Anon it was night again. Anon the tent was a house iridescent.

Clara had swung bolt upright.

"It was only the rest we needed," she sighed drearily. "Didn't I see birches in a draw beyond here? . . . A woman may think she wants to die, but life — the life in her — is too strong."

She withdrew from her bag, picked up the axe. Gail followed her, silent, in a vague access of awe at her unquenchable ache to survive. Motherhood, by its very genius, could not concede succumbing. The divinity of sex! . . . Hardly an atom of frost burred over the three remaining bags, usually so white and crusted. But outside, in the fusing blare of noon, the day was warmer.

Then Clara and Gail were alternately hurling the axe

into a great spreading, gnarled and disintegrating birch-tree, from whose trunk drooped immense scrolls of palish bark. They were soon packing punky armfuls of wood toward camp, Clara in the lead. Gail's eyes, roving northward, of a sudden descried far across the shimmering plain a scarlet speck. It lurched to and fro, close to the snow. His anger was pricked, to be thus deluded at the threshold of dissolution. With a feeble oath, Gail drew an arm across his eyes to shut out the object, and so dropped the wood. Unhearing, Clara trudged on with her burden for the tent.

He stared at the sticks scattered on the snow — snow that was cut in a wide groove, vanishing to right and left straight across his track, filled with the oval, grilled impress of webbed shoes. He dropped prone upon them. He had crossed here, blind! A well-worn trail. Prophetic had been Perry's aberration! Yet what did it avail, without human beings, now that they could only wait for death?

A delicate, muffled tinkling echoed in Gail's ears, helplessly set his heart a-thundering. He scrambled to his feet. The scarlet speck was close to — real, alive — but it had not grown into a man. Beyond it appeared a grey, waddling mass, a foreshortened string of dogs hitched to a sled, tails waving to and fro as they swung toward him. From over by his tent came a sound of chopping, and he beheld a coil of smoke.

But it was the little figure, standing alone before him, who was ordering the dogs to halt. That voice, so peremptory yet childish — where had he heard it? The creaking of runners in the friable snow ceased. The chilled blood boiled out into his vitals, for sight had returned to Gail's eyes. The boy there, clad in bedticking with a fox hood, looked up at him from

clear, quizzical eyes, over the flap of fur across his snub nose.

It was Sydney's Arthur.

"Thain — you!" . . . Gail was pressing a small, fragile and ruddy face against his bosom, as it queried, "Ain't you got no malemutes? Father's hiking right behind."

He saw two other figures, of a man and a woman, heard them call with a fearsome wonder, running toward the boy. But Gail only found himself enunciating, "Caribou meat. I smell it on your face, son."

"Sure. We shot two yesterday," piped the child, manfully. "More'n we could freight. Caught them on our crick back o' the big camp."

Then the man was facing Gail.

"By the jawbone of Samson!" exclaimed the fellow.

A chord far back in Gail's memory began to vibrate. He knew that rough, kindly voice.

"Something — 'Out of the strong,'" Gail's lips moved. "I'm soft, I guess. But neither that nor the hardness has killed me yet." Again his eyes danced, sightless.

"No, partner," said the familiar stranger with a quick solemnity. "I was all wrong that winter, about you and myself, over women in particular. It was one *I* needed, and have got."

At first unmindful of the woman standing rigid there, Gail now caught upon his swimming vision, as a moist tide flooded it, the fellow's milk-white teeth, his sharp amber irises.

"You've not saved me again," broke out Gail, vacuously. "No, no!" The lash of indebtedness, always so abhorrent to him, flicked his anger and apathy; the

smouldering self flamed, prodding all his senses. "Man can't give, or take away, the right to life."

A hearty laughter checked Gail. Yet instantly he rasped —

"Dick!" His stare consumed the gay youth's green plaid mackinaw, his round wool cap with a knob on top. "Dick Trueblood!"

"Gail, you look as though you'd crawled out of a coffin," he cheered. "Any Siwash seeing you, 'ud stampede or shoot you for a *shaman's* devil."

"Ought to see the others," averred Gail, blankly. "We'd laid down to die. Said so — flat."

Ever the remote excruciation is that in the shadow of extinction nothing matters. But Dick winced.

Faint — Gail's joy was but a phantom; so sapped, even the elemental faculties of manhood, that he could not yet respond to the splendour of deliverance. Only, Life was a flux, a mighty rhythm. Naught was fixed. Existence was but the mutability of atoms. . . .

"Others?" — Dick's old, imperative tone.

"Look by that fire," pointed Gail. "Mine there, like your woman here. The same fate for us in this country, I guess."

"Our land, won through them." Dick coloured, but with a shy chuckle. "And she's weakened me jest enough with her shears. Eh, Mrs. Delilah Trueblood?"

At last Gail followed Dick's glance toward the silent, dumbfounded woman. Her head had drooped into her hands, and she was gently quivering. But now Gail could see clearly — the grey squirrel pelts he remembered made into a *parka*, the white toque. And soon she resolutely raised her face: the abrupt bang over the round, appealing countenance, no longer shrewd or doll-like, but transfigured, strongly tender. Those

blue eyes, their flintiness forever dissolved, filled as she turned away, a hand at the lump in her throat.

"Gail seen me at my best and worst," she cried. "I never told you, Dick. It was him, more than Borden's marrying on the outside, saved me." She stopped with a choke. "Gail and Arthur one night. . . ."

Gail flushed, with thoughts of Chickaman, of the bath-house, "Javver" and the yellow shades, the horse-whip; of his temptation, compassion, and disdain. Was it more to create than save?

"Oh, the kid told me, Sydney," muttered Dick, staring straight before him, striving to be harsh and careless. "And I says to him," he turned to Arthur, who was picking up the wood, chucking it on the sled, "'Huh, your mother's an undiscovered country for me, like the Tsana, the only one left for a man raised up here, and as a rustler, the spittin' ringer for her son.' That was two months back on the trail." He faced Gail. "Arthur put me onto this notion for the heart-stuff, though he ain't mine. And once you bluffed me in that. Only show us a sky-pilot!"

"It was Dick's charity," uttered Sydney. "Or I'd 'a' been dead."

Gail blazed inwardly, with some vast, gratified, inordinate ecstasy, welling toward Dick Trueblood, as a counterpart of himself.

III

Again the dogs ceased swinging their fluffy tails. They were at the wrecked tent. Outside it, Clara's fire had sunk into the snow. She was lifting the big kettle, steaming with the last duff of rice, bacon rind, and the raw-hide of moccasins. The four caught sight of Gail and the newcomers, listlessly fixed on them for a mo-

ment glazed and dizzy eyes; then, squatting about the food, began to eat, slowly, tremulously, oblivious of the drawn and aghast stares fixed upon their skeleton, abominable features. Gail ate also.

They blew upon each mouthful. Not a word was spoken. The dogs began to whimper, above the sputter of the sticks. Sydney gasped and averted her humid eyes. Dick stiffened, pale and open-mouthed; Arthur's tender lips twitched, as if he were braving pain.

"Eat — for our three lives, Gail," murmured Clara, suddenly becoming ravenous. But Lena, who had dragged herself bag and all from the tent, a muffled bulk, inertly dropped her spoon. Sydney picked it up, trying to feed her.

"That's no use, with her scurvy," said Trueblood. "But we can get them all back to the big camp to-night, and potatoes."

The words seemed, at first mockingly, to pierce their lethargy. An empty grin creased the powder pits of Pete's cheeks. Then following Clara, he with Bleven and Gail began wolfing the cooked mess, attacked it with bare fingers. Once Perry paused, drew the back of a hand across his blank and monstrous lineaments, now alight with the dazzling, yet animal, transport of truth; and he found speech:

"Potatoes? You'll josh once too often. How far is camp?"

"Right across the river," answered Dick. "You're at the upper canyon. And Gail, your discovery stakes I found ain't been jumped yet. The first chechakos expected there — they'll be corpses."

Dead-O gave a soundless guffaw; but the news appeared, aggressively, to loose Bleven's kindling mind.

"Who's the woman?" he pointed to Sydney, who had risen from Arlene.

"A female Jason, that's led me into gold," answered Trueblood, inscrutably as ever, tongue-in-cheek. "Not fleeced me yet, either."

"Hey?" Perry gaped, throatily; and with a wild glance at Gail, flung out his arms toward Lena. The vein down the middle of his forehead, which had been protruding like a charred root, began to crimson and pulsate.

"Hear him, Gail," burst out Clara. "I can't speak. Lena's confessed, about your desertion of her, what she's done."

"The night-mare's over — emptiness filled," Bleven wandered again, fiercely, in the stress of so unwonted emotion. And he, who a day back had wept in self-pity, went on, "And it wasn't no martyrdom. The trail did it, and you, Gail Thain."

Solemnly Gail bowed his head; for he knew.

"The prodigal's struck pay-streak, hey?" divined Dick.

"She's mine — mine!" cried Perry. "Lena's free from him, divorced from Thain."

Dazed and trembling, Arlene looked from one to another; then slowly staggered to her feet. Standing there, immutable, her moist, bird-like eyes concentrated upon Gail.

"And it was a fight," she uttered starkly, "for a woman like me . . . against the both of you . . . to admit it."

Sydney with a troubled gasp shielded the puzzled Arthur.

"Arlene!" cried Gail, overcome by her direct, com-

elling words. She — the first spur to all his adventurous, aspiring pilgrimage, partner then, and in his late despair!

Clara leveled them a look of gladness, as for some great atonement. Dick with Pete, also enlivened by the finished duff, was loading their bedding on the dog-sled.

"Looks to me like the old man had better ride," said Trueblood to Gail, marking Dead-O's limps. "The blonde, too."

"I think mebbe the right foot'll have to come off," said Pete, hearing them. "But that won't bother me, as a millionaire with autymobiles. An' Perry — ye had better learn to chew. I'd call a celluloid nose dangerous to such a smoker."

"Look a-here, Thain," said Trueblood. "I got news for you, about that Charles Lamar you killed. You recollect the operator Gash, I had on my sled with rheumatism? Saw him in Chickaman the day I pulled out. He had a stake in Lamar's outfit, and was hornet-mad over a wireless in his fist that gave your townsite to Hartline."

"John!" exclaimed Clara. "Glory!"

IV

Dick and Sydney drove the sled, back-trailing to the rush camp above Gail's Gulch, as Arthur explained to Bleven how his foster-father had started on the main trail to Cook Inlet that morning, on a sudden errand which had terribly gladdened and distracted Sydney.

"He was hitting for the coast to get a parson to hitch them," said the boy.

Gail and Clara walked behind, through a gorgeous,

sparkling, rainbow world. Forward — away from this last and crucial struggle, won within its hideous shadows, into Life, forever at the beginning!

"In the name of our own blood," she uttered softly. "Of Love, the Future, and Victory. . . ."

But her words were strong and cheerful, clear and indomitable in their old vibrance. Her conquering certainty was like strong spirit in Gail's veins, to his now lucid mind. But ah, how feeble before her will had been his great thirst! She, again the all-enduring Clara of ordeals and dreams, the beloved, eternal mother, ever battling for the perpetuity of his Youngest World.

His lost fire and pride of being awake and raged. His thoughts whirled on, transfigured, final toward Existence; in a reckless tide of power, a surge of mastery. Now for the first time, through the clear glass of Clara's maternity in triumph, he grasped the splendid, fevered verities of her apocalypse; and his soul shrank, humbled. Not vain had been the ache of all his long, valiant yearning. Real, real, attained, was the supreme goal in flesh and blood.

So intoxicated, Gail felt the fate of his barren, brooding realm stir within his loins; beheld himself, creative, dynamic; with Dick Trueblood, and the hosts of John Hartline's aspirations, in a dire conflict against Lamar and his despoiling masters, the covetous unfit of Seattle and Hoherda. *They* opposed Nature; that was the war; theirs, not Her's, was the anarchy. Her's was the Great Will of Existence — beyond the Self — to populate, to obliterate the corrupting and the sterile. The righteous and strong must win, and they were such who did. He saw the North teeming with cities, men and children sprung from its chosen youth; a white,

multiplying manhood dominating the earth by the treasure locked beneath these magical, vast spaces. And he was a prophet, avatar in so epic a dream of empire, the pioneer-demon of this Youngest World.

Thus furtively within him was re-born the Self. Was it altogether vanity? Was to strive for the Self always to malign Existence and the Multitude as but the contesting wind and the shorn lambs? Did the Self give to the steeling rigour of life, to the apparent, cancelling haplessness of Nature—the guise of treachery? Not wholly. For this Great Will was a might as lone and single as the Self; beyond it and Nature, decreeing pity and cruelty. Never had his Self said, “Evil be thou my Good.” Whom had his hardness ever doomed, whose end was not already sealed? Cruelty was only the spur to justice; pity was the soul’s trumpet call to courage.

In this consummate awe of victory, there haunted Gail this Power which lies behind Mankind and Nature, behind Fate and Being, beyond the predatory Self; whose creed for survival is ruthlessness and charity; which tempers with Love—alike of man, of earth, of woman—the strife of endless birth, into the music of the spheres. . . . It was not Bob Snowden’s message, but His who cast the money changers from the temple, yet said, “Love thine enemies.”

It was God. Immortality *His* guerdon. . . .

Strength filled them. It was as though neither had ever starved and suffered. Mists blew from some high region in the West. Sunlight fell upon this swirling mesh of vapour, and they walked beside their shadows. They emerged upon a plateau of buck-brush, whose delicate branches, freighted with glittering spines, spread

a miniature forest of frost that crumbled at a touch. They flushed up a white owl. Height after height shouldered and curved around them, dawned and dissolved.

"You and I, Gail. . . . Staying by our dreams —" she panted, passionately, with flashing, tawny eyes. "Ours — gold and the Youngest World. Gail, you and I."

For hours as they threaded these coral jungles, their shadows appeared to detach from the moving mists, to sweep behind its veils, then out and across the bleak and vacant deserts of Alaska. They trooped on — a phantom procession, an army of ghosts. And among these spirits, Gail imagined that he discerned Jonesy, Ireson, Blackwood, Tom Guiteau and old Mease, Clifford of the foxes, Father Morice, Len Borden, all drawing into the glow of the North's perpetual majesty. Yet one tall and dominating figure in worn corduroys, azure-eyed, large-browed, ever led them, and at times Bob Snowden merged into the outline of Clara herself.

Gail felt as one who had been drowning, but now could breast the surface of an undiscovered sea. And doing so, he trod solid earth that bridged the void of that illimitable and smiling waste. Once more he was on the strawberry fields; but neither where their spoke-like parallels ground him forward to a first poignant sorrow; nor in the swooning zenith above the shadowy tentacles of glaciers: but as a wanderer, marching eternally upon the common trail of Life.

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